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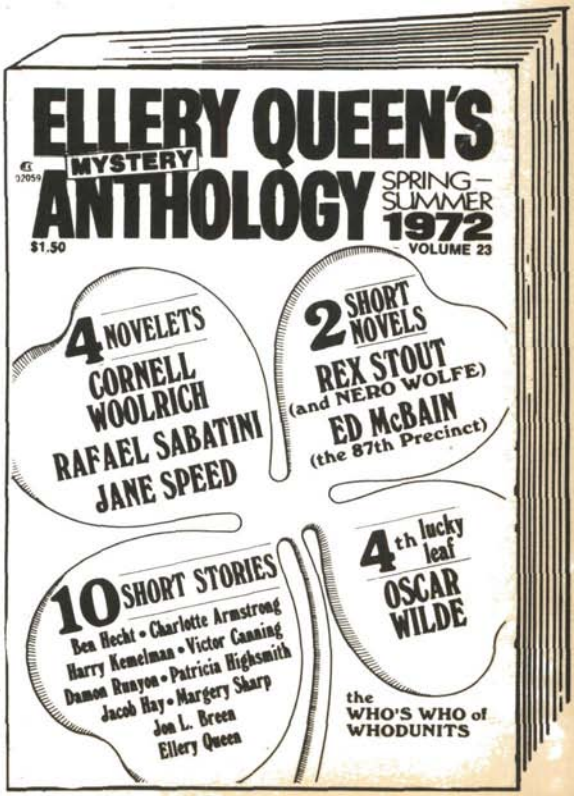

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL

by STANLEY ELLIN

"So," Dr. Schwimmer said. "So. It comes to this at last. The inevitable. Confrontation, penetration, decision-making, action. Wait."

The office door was partly open. Through it could be heard the sound of a typewriter being pecked at slowly and uncertainly. The doctor rose from behind his desk, crossed the room, and closed and locked the door. He returned to the swivel chair behind the desk. The desk was long and wide, a polished slab of walnut mounted on stainless steel legs and without drawers. Arranged on it were a crystal ashtray; a cardboard box of straw-tipped Turkish cigarettes—("I don't even enjoy smoking," the doctor remarked, squaring the edge of the box with the edge of the ashtray, "but these help the image, you understand. The exotic, somewhat mysterious image I cultivate to impress the impressionable females in my clientele."); a razor-edged, needle-pointed letter opener of Turkish design—("Also part of the image, naturally. Again the exoticism of the Near East, with its suggestion of the menacingly virile."); a cigarette lighter; a small brass tube like a lipstick container, which did

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not contain lipstick but a breath deodorant that left the mouth reeking of peppermint; and a neat little tape recorder, an XJE-IV Memocord, not much larger than the box of Turkish cigarettes.

"So." The doctor leaned toward the tape recorder. He hesitated, then sat back in his chair. "No. No need to put any of this on tape, Albert."

"Why, Doctor? Is it too intensely personal to be recorded for posterity?"

"I am a psychotherapist, Albert. All the business transacted in this room is intensely personal."

"Never to this extent though, is it? And that name Albert. Must you continually address me by it? You know how I detest it."

"Too bad. But I will address you as Albert. This is necessary. It is a way of establishing identities and relationships. And consider the distinguished men who bore that name. Einstein. Schweitzer. They seemed to survive it reasonably well, didn't they?"

"I still detest it. There wasn't even a sensible reason for being saddled with it. No one in the family ever had it. Mother was enamored of the figure on the tins of tobacco father smoked, that's all. An incredible woman. Imagine naming one's first-born after a pipe tobacco. Or was she so viciously foresighted that she knew this was the perfect name for a child who was doomed to become a bald, potbellied, blobby-nosed little man with weak vision and a perpetually nagging sinus condition?"

"So. Suddenly we are faced with the ghost of the mother?"

"Why not, Doctor? I didn't manufacture my own ugliness, did I?"

"Albert, if I were a Freudian, we could have such a good time with this mother image. We could make it your sacrificial goat, stuff all your problems into it, and slaughter it. So. But luckily for us, I am not a Freudian. Your dead mother deserves better than to be declared guilty of your misfortunes. Consider how she made it her duty to bolster your shaky ego every day of her life. Your academic brilliance, your professional success, your devotion to her—it was like a catechism to her, the recitation of her admiration for you day after day."

"It was a trap. It was a pit I lived in like a captured tiger, feeding on those greasy chunks of admiration she flung to me."

"So. Very dramatic. Very colorful. But an evasion, Albert. Only an evasion."

"Is it? Then what about the

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father image? The big, handsome, loudmouthed father. And the two handsome, muscular brothers. The overwhelming males in my home. And me the runt of the litter."

"You were, Albert. But never overwhelmed. Consider the facts. Your father died when you were a child. His absence may have affected you, but never his presence. And that pair of clods, Albert, those two handsome, muscular brothers, stood in awe of your intellect, were wary of your cold self-restraint, terrified of your unpredictable explosions of temper. They quickly learned not to step over the lines you drew. Do you remember how one earned a broken leg when he was tripped up by you at the head of the staircase for trying a little bullying? How the other found himself playing a game where he was locked in a trunk and almost smothered in payment for a small insult? Yes, yes, a few such episodes and they soon came to understand that one did not carelessly tread on the toes of this small, fat, pale older brother with the thick eyeglasses and the sniffle. They are still afraid of you, Albert. They are two of your very few triumphs. But it is your failure alone that concerns us. Let us get on with it."

"My failure? Am I the only one in this room stamped with failure? My dear Doctor, what about the way you've managed to destroy a splendid practice in a few short months? Eccentricity is one thing, Doctor. Patients like a little eccentricity in their therapists. But they also draw lines. A therapist who lives in a daze, who sits lost to the world when patients are trying to communicate with him, who angrily sends them packing when they resent this—what did you think was bound to happen to this practice in short order? And what course did you think your fellow professionals would take when they observed your grotesque behavior? Your inexplicable compulsions? Did you really expect them to continue to refer patients to you? No, Doctor, there is no need to rush through this consultation. No need to look at clocks and measure out your time in expensive little spoonfuls any longer. The clocks have stopped. We have all the time to ourselves now we can possibly use."

"Albert, listen to me. This room is not meant to be an arena where we turn our cruelty on each other. We are not antagonists. We will achieve nothing through antagonism."

"You're a coward, Doctor."

"We are both cowards about

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some things, Albert. Do you think I disparage you when I say you are essentially a creature of emotion? Believe me, I do not."

"I don't believe you. You're much too clever with words, Doctor, to be believed in that regard. Creature of emotion. What you mean is incorrigible romantic, don't you? An ugly little wretch stuffed to the bursting point with romantic visions. Made self-destructive by them. A fifty-year-old man flung back into adolescence and unable to claw his way out of it. Why shouldn't you disparage him?"

"Because, Albert, you are not play-acting your condition. You are not pretending you face a crisis. The condition is real. The crisis is real. One does not disparage a reality."

"A reality based on dreams? On sexual fantasies dredged up from my unconscious while I lie snoring in bed?"

"All these are realities, too. Are scientific laws and material objects the only reality? No, no, Albert. Your mistake from the start was in not recognizing the validity of those dreams. Of the situation they depicted."

"But the situation was all in my own mind."

"In your emotions. Your emotions, Albert. If tests were made while you were asleep and dreaming of this woman, they would clearly indicate physiological reactions. A quickened breathing, an increase in blood pressure, sexual excitation."

"Just as I told you. All the symptoms of delayed adolescence. The pimply high school boy's nightly dreams of his nubile girl friend. The only difference is that in the daylight he joins her in some noisy roost where they happily share a nauseous concoction of ice cream and syrup and hold hands under the table. While all I could do was turn night dreams into day dreams."

"Slowly, Albert. Confrontation, penetration, decision-making, action. Each in its turn. So far we have barely begun the penetration. We have merely put aside the clichés of the possessive mother and bullying siblings and turned to the image of the dream woman herself. We have a distance to go before the decision-making."

"Girl, Doctor. Maiden, if you will. Not woman."

"So? Is it important that she has not reached full womanhood?"

"Yes. I don't like women. Something happens to a girl the instant she becomes one. In that instant she becomes too knowing, too wise, too self-sufficient to provide happiness for any man."

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"Not any man. Perhaps only men who are afraid they don't measure up. Tell me, Albert. What kind of man were you in your first dreams of this girl? Still the small, fat, fifty-year-old lump of self-hatred? Or heroic in dimensions?"

"I don't know. It's hard to remember."

"Think. Penetrate."

"I'm trying to. Not heroic. That much I'm sure of. Beyond that, I still don't know. I wasn't aware of my body, my appearance, my deficiencies. Only of my sensations when I saw her there. Ecstatic recognition. Passionate desire for her. And I remember my own astonishment that I should feel this. I hadn't ever known I was capable of such feelings. All my life I've paid for my female companionship. Paid to satisfy my physical needs. There was never a suggestion of emotional involvement in the transactions. Now here I was, being drowned in emotionalism. I woke up suffocating with it."

"So. And you knew on waking that this dream girl was based on an actuality? That she had a flesh-and-blood counterpart?"

"Not then. Not the first time. Only later when I realized the dream was recurrent. And then only when in one of the later dreams I realized that I knew her name. Sophia. When I woke that morning it struck me that of course she was the counterpart of a real Sophia. The inept child I had recently hired as my receptionist."

"She resembled her?"

"More and more, once I knew her name. At first she was shadowy. She was only the suggestion of a beautiful Greek maiden. After I knew her name she took on clearer and clearer definition. Still shadowy, because we always met at night in dim lighting, but now as if a veil had been removed from her face. No more chiaroscuro, but every delicate curve of feature revealed. Sophia. I can even remember the idiotic imagery, the coinage of every bad poet, that crossed my mind in that dream when I stood there looking at her in full recognition for the first time. Doe-eyed, raven-haired, swan-necked. My God, I didn't even blush at my own puerile poeticizing of her. I rejoiced in it."

"You think this girl in the dream was aware of your feelings?"

"She must have been. How could she help it? I tell you, Doctor, I yearned toward her with such intensity that she must have felt the current surging from me. This was before I even recognized her

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identity. I walked into this room, a bedroom lit by a small lamp somewhere, and she stood silent and unmoving in the middle of the room dressed in a white gown—the classically simple Greek gown—and with what seemed like an almost transparent veil covering her hair and face. A tender, living goddess. I was stricken by the sight of her. The emptiness in me, my lifetime of emptiness, was suddenly filled with a white-hot lava of emotion. You see? Again I am poeticizing like a fool, but what other way is there to describe it? In psychologic jargon? In those deadly words: *I fell in love?* Although, believe me, Doctor, coming from me, those words mean infinitely more than they would coming from the ordinary man."

"I do believe you, Albert. But are you sure you never knew such an emotion before?"

"Never."

"Think, Albert. You were not born middle-aged. In your youth there must have been some woman—girl—who excited this emotion in you."

"Never. I never permitted myself to feel anything like this. I knew the response my size, my ugliness, my sweaty, tongue-tied ineptitude in conversation would draw from any girl I thought desirable. Why invite disaster? Better to freeze the heart into a block of ice than have it torn to pieces."

"And you did not experience any of this when you confronted the dream Sophia? When you let her feel the current of emotion surging from you?"

"No. I seemed to have no room in me for anything but that aching desire."

"Sexual desire?"

"That would have been later. In the early dream, all I wanted to do was touch her. Just touch her shoulder gently with my fingertips. To reassure her, perhaps. Or myself. I moved toward her with my hand outstretched, and she moved away a little, barely out of my reach. Then suddenly we were someplace else. I recognized where at once. The hallway outside the room. The hallway of my brownstone house."

"Yes?"

"The old brownstone. My living tomb. My office downstairs, the bedrooms on the second floor where we stood. All those empty bedrooms. I was jubilant. This lovely, veiled creature was with me in my domain, I was not trespassing on hers. I looked and saw her standing now in the middle of that long gloomy hallway. While I watched she held out a hand as if inviting me to clasp it

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in mine. She pressed her other hand against the wall there, the blank, wallpapered expanse between two doors, and an opening showed in it. She moved through the opening, it closed behind her, and she was gone. I was frantic. Wild with despair. I ran to the wall and searched for some clue to the opening, but there was none. I struck my fist against the wall, but my fist had no substantiality, no strength. It moved in slow motion against the wall, it met it with hardly the impact of a feather brushing against it. That was all. I woke up drenched with sweat, weak with a sense of futility.

"I knew at once it had been a dream. I knew that the logical thing to do was either lie there and dispassionately analyze it or to clear it completely from my mind. But I knew that either way would purge me of the glorious new emotions I had discovered in the girl's presence. I was in love. For the first time in my life—at the age of fifty, mind you—I was willingly and hopelessly in love. I had the sense of it in my every nerve.

"It was dawn now. Incredibly, I got out of bed in that gray light and went out into the hallway, searching along its wall for the mysterious opening in it, desperately running my hands over its smooth surface. I went into the room on the other side of the wall there, my youngest brother's room, empty of all its furniture since his marriage, and it was as empty as ever, a fine dust on its floor and that was all. I knew then that the only thing left to me was the recurrence of the dream, a re-entry into the shadowy world where the girl might be waiting for me. Would surely be waiting for me."

"So." Dr. Schwimmer rested his head against the back of his swivel chair and closed his eyes. "Then from the very start, Albert, you surrendered to this girl completely."

"Completely."

"You asked nothing in return. You expected nothing in return."

"At the start, nothing. Only her presence."

"And later?"

"Later, as the dream recurred again and again, I wanted her response. Her acknowledgement that she felt for me at least a part—a little—of what I felt for her. I wanted her not to retreat from me every time I reached toward her. But I forgave her for it each time she did. I knew it was because this experience was as strange and novel for her as it was for me. She was very young. Untouched. Timid. She was to be wooed gently, not

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taken by force. And I was willing to be patient, because my fingertips came infinitesimally closer to her each time. I settled for that."

"So. And when you realized that this girl of the dreams was, in reality, the pretty little receptionist who sat in your outer office every working day of the week it did not break the spell?"

"No, because it didn't end the dreams. At night I had the Sophia of the dreams; in daylight I had the Sophia of reality nearby where, whenever I chose, I could look at her, speak to her.

"And the living reality, as it turned out, made the dreams that much more exciting. Every detail of the flesh-and-blood Sophia was transmitted to the dream image I loved. Now that image removed its veil and showed me the glowing eyes and parted lips and curve of cheek of the enchanting child I employed in my office. The length of leg, swell of breast, everything became substantial in the dreams."

"But you did not transfer your emotions to this flesh-and-blood girl? Then or ever?"

"No."

"Are you sure of that, Albert? Consider this very carefully. It is important."

"I still say no. I didn't want to risk it. I didn't have to. It was more than enough that I had the dream Sophia to woo and win. In the daylight there were mirrors in the house where I would catch sight of myself at unexpected moments. A self that invited rejection. In the dimly lit room and hallway of the dreams there were no mirrors. I had no view of myself then. I never gave thought to what I looked like. Above all, somehow I knew that the brownstone house stood all alone in the dream world and that there was no one else in it besides the girl and me. I was the only man in her existence, she had no freedom of choice. Ultimately she would have to give herself to me."

"A quaint way to phrase it, Albert. Almost Victorian. And what does it connote? She allows you to touch her at last? To press your lips to her blushing cheek? Or more?"

"More. Much more."

"Yes?"

"She would be my slave. My willing slave. Grateful that she could be possessed by me. She would not so much love me as worship me."

"So. And all this, Albert, in the light of your futile pursuit of her through dream after dream? The nightly confrontation in the bedroom, the scene in the shadowy hallway where,

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at the crucial moment, she disappears through that blank wall? Now tell me. Did you never wonder what lay on the other side of that wall?"

"I didn't have to. I was sure I knew what was there. Her room. The small room with carpeted walls and floor where she lay on a bed under some diaphanous covering breathlessly waiting for me to find my way to her. Afraid of the moment when I would, but eagerly anticipating it. Her room. Her solitary, sweetly scented refuge."

"So there it is, Albert. That preconception was your great mistake. Your tragic misjudgment."

"The room was there. I entered it. I found it exactly as I had imagined it."

"No, you did not. Otherwise, would there be this crisis? This anguish? You should have been prepared, Albert, for more than you bargained for. You should have known yesterday when you first saw your real Sophia's young man in her office, when she proudly introduced him to you, that there was a crisis brewing. Admit it. Didn't your hackles rise when you met that young man? When you took his measure?"

"All right, yes. Yes. But I didn't make anything of it then. Why should I? All my life I've hated these hulking Adonises, these huge, handsome, brute images of masculinity. My hatred for this specimen was innate. Why should I think it had anything to do with the adoration my infatuated, flesh-and-blood Sophia aimed at him?"

"Hard words, Albert. But the dream Sophia is cast in the image of the flesh-and-blood Sophia. There was one danger signal. The other was at the instant in your dream last night when you pressed a hand against that wall, that barrier to her hidden room, and at last it opened to you. Didn't you wonder why, at long last, it should suddenly open? Didn't it enter your mind that it might be a means of providing you, not with the ultimate experience, but with the ultimate truth?"

"No. And you yourself know this only through hindsight. When I entered that room I felt jubilation. Utter ecstasy. Nothing else. I had no premonition I would find them on that bed together, she and that hulk. I had no idea until that incredible moment that this room was their refuge, not hers alone. Or, worst of all, that when caught shamelessly sprawled beside him in their lovemaking, she would only

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smile pityingly at me.

"How could I be prepared for any of that? After all, those dreams were mine. How could I ever imagine they would be invaded by any gross stranger? And now—"

"Yes?"

"Now that I know the truth I can't turn my mind away from it. Awake or asleep, all I can think of is that she was taken from me. Violated. And with her eager consent. God almighty, since I found my way into that room I've lived only with the picture of them in my mind. I can't live with it any longer."

"So. Then it must be exorcised, Albert, must it not?"

"Yes."

"At last we come to the decision-making. And is it to be my decision to make, Albert? Mine alone?"

"Yes."

"You will accept it without question?"

"Completely."

"Good. Then I will state the case directly. It is obvious that someone must pay the penalty for your betrayal, Albert. As a sane and intelligent man you must know that a blood sacrifice offers the only possible solution in a case like this. The only one. Under any conditions it would be impossible for you to be released from your agony while your betrayers maintain their obscene relationship. Yes. One or the other must be eliminated. But which? The intruder?"

"And then what, Doctor? Another such intruder to take his place in that room? Another crisis? Now that I know what the girl really is—what she's capable of—can I expect more than that?"

"True. Then you plainly see she herself must be sacrificed."

"Yes."

"So. And you also understand how it must be done?"

"Yes. With a blade, naturally."

"Naturally. A blade of the finest steel. That is traditional, and there are times when one sees the wisdom behind these timeworn traditions." The doctor picked up the letter opener from his desk and regarded it with admiration. He turned it slowly back and forth so that sunlight from the window flowed up and down the blade. "The finest steel, a tradition in itself. More than eight inches of it, Albert. More than enough for its purpose.

"And you realize, of course, that the first killing blow deep between the lower ribs does not mean the completion of the ritual. There must be total release of the emotions immediately afterward. A frenzied

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hacking until the lovely image is made a horror. A full measure of blood must flow to wash away betrayal. Remember, Albert, the therapeutic value of the act lies in that."

"Yes. Of course."

"Then," said the doctor, "all that is left is action."

He unlocked the door and opened it slightly on the drafty ground-floor corridor of the old brownstone. And, when in answer to his call, Miss Sophia Kaloosdian, doe-eyed, raven-haired, swan-necked, a large wad of chewing gum working rhythmically in her jaws, left her desk in the outer office and came to see what he wanted, he was waiting for her with smiling confidence, the hilt of the letter opener gripped tight in his fist and hidden behind his back.

The confidence was not misplaced. Dr. Albert Schwimmer may have been short, fat, nearsighted, and with a perpetual sniffle, but he was very strong.

NEXT MONTH . . .

12 NEW stories — including

HUGH PENTECOST *(detective John Jericho)*

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and a "thriller" by

CORNELL WOOLRICH *("unknown" novelet)*

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a *NEW* crime story by

MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

James Voorhees devised a perfect plan to kill his wife Lilla. He took his time, perfecting every detail, watching out for every possible discrepancy . . .

NUMBER ONE SUSPECT

by MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD

When a married woman is murdered, the Number One suspect is always her husband. James Voorhees knew that.

He had every intention of killing his wife Lilla. His forbearance of her nagging, whining, and sloppy housekeeping, of her distaste for bed, had reached its limits. But he had not the slightest intention of being punished for his act.

He had considered all other methods of ending a marriage that had gone sour in its first year. But there were no grounds for him to divorce her, and even if there had been he did not care to sacrifice an exorbitant part of his comfortable income by paying alimony the rest of his life—no other fool, he was sure, would ever make the mistake of marrying Lilla. There was not the slightest possibility she would divorce him; why should she? She had every advantage—an easy life, all the material things she needed (she was lazy rather than greedy), and a hide impervious to sarcasm, complaint, or anger. He could of course simply desert her, but that would mean leaving his very good agency job and his native city, and in the end being caught anyhow and made to pay up.

So there was nothing left but homicide.

But only a safe, perfect, utterly undetectable homicide.

There was no hurry; he had endured her for six years, and he could stand a short indefinite time more. He

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approached the problem in the spirit of solving a mathematical puzzle, giving it all the careful attention to detail he had given to the making of model airplanes in his youth.

So for some weeks most of his spare time was spent in the public library—he could hardly arouse suspicion by bringing books of this nature home with him—boning up on forensic procedure. He also read fact-crime narratives voluminously, noting particularly the mistakes other men had made, and following keenly the methods by which detectives had outwitted them. And at last he was ready.

A hippie who happened to sit next to him in a bus found to his surprise when he got back to his pad that someone had snipped off a lock of his long blond hair. (Voorhees was dark-haired.) An old gentleman who was his neighbor in a movie house discovered with great annoyance that a button had been clipped off the brown overcoat he had held on his lap, together with the thread and a snippet of the cloth. (Voorhees had a brown overcoat himself, but with quite different buttons and of entirely different fabric.)

Next came the establishment of an unbreakable alibi. It had to be genuine and simple—no complications to trip him up.

He started piling work up at the office, slowing down during the day so that he had to work nights to keep up to schedule. He cultivated the night watchman of the building, chatting with him at times as the watchman passed the open office door on his rounds and once in a while offering him a cigar.

Next, the gun. Thanks to the permissive laws of his state that was easy. All he had to do was answer an advertisement in a sports magazine, send a money order with a false name and an accommodation address—one of those places to be found in every city that receive mail for a fee, no questions asked—and the gun was his. He bought cartridges for it without difficulty, loaded it with three of them, and threw the rest in the nearest garbage can; they could explode harmlessly some day at the municipal dump. It had been years since he had handled a gun, but he hadn't forgotten how—though that had been in the Army. Three shots would be more than enough.

Carefully, over and over, he checked the exact time it took to drive, under all conceivable weather and traffic conditions, from the lot where he parked his car to his home, which was not in the suburbs but in a rather good residential district

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of separate houses affording enough space for shrubbery in front and a small garden in the rear.

The day had to be a Thursday. That was the day of the noisy one-hour TV Western to which, for some odd reason, Lilla was addicted. She was growing deaf and refused to admit it; she spent every evening (and the rest of the day, for all he knew) glued to the boob-box, and insisted on keeping the sound up however much he suffered: he had stopped protesting. But this program was the best; it came on at 9:00, just right for his purposes.

There was still no hurry. He could wait, and perfect every detail, watch out for every possible discrepancy.

What would you call it? L-day, for Lilla? M-day, for murder?

The day came.

When the night watchman made his nine o'clock round, Voorhees had his door ajar. "Come in, Perkins," he called. "Have a smoke."

"Why, thanks, Mr. Voorhees." The slow elderly man smiled gratefully. Everybody liked Mr. Voorhees except the cleaning woman; she had to come back too often to do his office after she'd finished the rest of that floor. But even that was only a mild dissatisfaction.

"I'll be through here in another hour," Voorhees said. "Where'll you be then—up on the sixth?"

"That's right."

"Okay, I'll give you a shout when I leave, and you can tell the cleaner I've gone."

"I'll do that." The watchman puffed on the cigar—a lot better one than he'd ever bought for himself—and went away. As soon as the footsteps were out of hearing, Voorhees closed his office door and checked his pockets. Everything was there—the tuft of blond hair in a cellophane envelope, the button with its thread and torn bit of cloth in another, the loaded gun.

Fifteen minutes at the most to get there, fifteen minutes back. Time enough to use the stairs coming and going, so there would be no sound of the automatic elevator. He'd remembered to wear crepe-soled shoes today. He had a night key to the building, of course. He left his office door unlocked; nobody would pass.

And fifteen minutes in between to do the job.

The morning, before he'd gone to work, had been as usual. Up, leaving Lilla still sprawled in sleep in the other twin bed, shower, shave, dress. It had been years since she'd

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bothered about his breakfast. He wasn't hungry anyway—a glass of orange juice and instant coffee were enough. Calm down, he told himself. It reminded him of vacation days in his boyhood, when he and a chum sneaked out early to meet for some exciting expedition, a hike, a circus parade, a ball game in the park—the same flush of elation, the same delight in planned secrecy. This time, of course, he wasn't early; he left at his usual time. Lilla would sleep till noon, unless the phone woke her.

One chore he had to attend to before he went—unfasten the back window of the living room that took up the whole left side of the ground floor. Lilla was too lazy ever to trouble with such trifles; he himself always had to lock up the house before he went to bed. He eased the window silently up and down—perfect.

The day went just as always, with a deliberate slowness so that he'd have to work late. He had lunch with a casual acquaintance, dinner alone in a nearby restaurant where they knew him by sight. Neither his secretary nor the office boy would be able to claim any difference in work procedure or in his demeanor.

When the others left at 5:00 he was still working; they were used to that. If they thought of it at all, it was to be grateful they were never asked to work overtime. His co-employees liked him—he was always polite and considerate, but business-like. To the sideburned 18-year-old boy and the miniskirted girl he was merely part of the furniture.

Tomorrow, of course, there would be a flurry. But naturally he wouldn't be there, and by the time he returned, after the funeral and the newspaper stories, there would be only an awkward interlude and he could handle that.

He left his car around the corner and went the rest of the way on foot. Nobody was visible, though there were lights in most of the neighboring houses and two doors away a party seemed to be in progress, a noisy one. Voorhees was on amiable but not intimate terms with his neighbors; he was well thought of but no socializer. As for Lilla, she formed brief acquaintances that ended in quarrels. She preferred TV; you don't have to dress up for that, or go to a lot of trouble to entertain people. There was never any casual running in and out of neighbors.

Quietly, walking on the grass, he went around the house to the chosen window and looked in. Everything was just

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as he had expected. Lilla was slouched in the big armchair, her bleached waved head rising above its back. On the coffee table beside her was a box of chocolate creams; every few seconds her hand reached out for another one. At least she wasn't a lush; she had spared him that, if nothing else.

A battle was on between the law and the outlaws in some Western town of the 1880s. Gunfire was being exchanged. Softly Voorhees raised the window from the outside.

"Lilla!" he called sharply. That was the worst moment, when she jumped up, startled, and turned to face him. But it lasted only a second, and it was necessary—no woman could grapple with an intruder after she had been shot in the back of the head.

His shot was scarcely heard among the rest.

Lilla's head bounced; she jerked and fell face down on the carpet between the chair and the TV set. Her fall jarred the coffee table; the candy box fell off and chocolates were strewn on the floor.

One of his few worries had been the window shades. Not on the back windows—they were never pulled down there—but sometimes Lilla remembered to pull the two in front, sometimes not; when he was home in the evenings he always attended to it himself, though actually the house stood far enough back among the bushes in the front so that only a prowler would be able to look in. This time, fortunately, the shades were down; he wouldn't have to hurry to draw them as soon as he got in.

He hefted himself through the window and stepped into the room, leaving the pane partly open behind him.

He glanced at the radium dial of his wrist watch. Everything on time, as scheduled. He gazed at Lilla without a qualm, conscious only of a vast relief and a need for fast action. There was no doubt she was dead; he didn't need to check pulse or breath—he had been a good shot in his day and the bullet had pierced her brain. Not much blood was seeping out.

Swiftly and delicately he stooped and lifted her right hand—still warm and limp, of course, and as usual slightly dirty. Under the too-long silver fingernails he slipped a few of the long hairs from the unknown hippie. They would be utterly unlike his own. Then he closed the left hand on the button. He had remembered that the fabric had been cut, not torn; he had carefully pulled at it until nothing was

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left but the thread and a few loose fibers. He had also remembered to tear the hair where it had been cut.

He looked around him. The coffee table could be shoved askew, two chairs overturned, some chocolates ground into the carpet. He left the TV on. That would be enough. No worry about fingerprints; his would naturally be found everywhere.

. . . A prowler had discovered the unlocked window and had entered, relying (as he himself had done) on the noise of the TV gunfire to make his entry unheard, intending to sneak from the room, behind Lilla's back, to the upper floor to steal what he could find of money or valuables. Instead—what? Perhaps the prowler had stumbled, perhaps Lilla had felt the cold March air on her neck. She had—screamed?

Her screams would be feeble, like the rest of her flabby self, unheard above the TV. But she wasn't a coward. The prowler would have to silence her. She had caught at his coat, tried to grapple with him, scratched him with her long fingernails, torn at his hair. Things fell over, were knocked around. It would last only a minute.

Fingerprints? Nowadays the most amateur of burglars knew enough to wear gloves.

In a panic the man had torn loose and in a terrified reflex had pulled out a gun and fired; then, as she fell, he had run desperately out of the house and away, wanting only to escape . . .

It was perfectly planned. Voorhees could almost see him—a tough kid, probably a junkie, looking something like the young hippie whose hair was embedded in Lilla's fingernails.

He checked carefully. Only a few minutes had passed. The gun was back in his pocket, the two cellophane envelopes went into another pocket. The noisy party was still on, down the street.

At the nearest sewer grating he would stop and throw in the two envelopes and the gun. He had just enough time. At 9:55 at the latest he would be back in his office. He would clear his desk, put out the lights, lock his door, and call to the night watchman. This time Voorhees would take the elevator down, let himself out of the building, go back to the parking lot—there was no night attendant; that had been one of the many things he had taken into consideration—and drive home.

He would let himself into the garage as usual, turn off the ignition, lock the garage door,

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and enter the house by the inside door to the kitchen. The TV would still be on, with something loud. He would make his ghastly discovery, turn the noise off, phone the police, and gasp out his news.

All okay, and just time enough to take care of everything. Satisfied, he left quietly by the front door, fastened behind him. Nobody passed or noticed as he walked briskly to the corner and around it.

He had locked his car, but there are thieves' ways of getting around that. The car had been stolen. It was gone. He couldn't get back to his office in time without leaving a trail to himself.

CRIMINALIMERICK

ALL TOO HUMAN

by D. R. BENSEN

EQ, though a master detective,
Has moments of seeming defective.
He will wrap up a case—
It explodes in his face—
Calling down much parental invective.

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a HERCULE POIROT story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Hercule Poirot versus a problem in chess—but we hasten to reassure you: the chess problem is no dry-as-dust puzzle—it is more a problem in people; and you do not have to be able to play chess, or even know anything about the game, to be fascinated and to enjoy this "pure" detective story. Indeed, it is one of Agatha Christie's most cunningly conceived short stories, revealing her special technique with remarkable clarity and fullness within a mere 5,000 words . . .

A CHESS PROBLEM

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

Poirot and I often dined at a small restaurant in Soho. We were there one evening when we observed a friend at an adjacent table. It was Inspector Japp, and as there was room at our table he came and joined us. It was some time since either of us had seen him.

"Never do you stop in to see us nowadays," declared Poirot reproachfully. "Not since the affair of the Yellow Jasmine have we met, and that is nearly a month ago."

"I've been up north—that's why. Moosior Poirot, do you take any interest in chess?"

"I have played it, yes."

"Did you see that curious business yesterday? Match between two players of world-wide reputation, and one died during the game?"

"I saw a mention of it. Dr. Savaronoff, the Russian champion, was one of the players, and the other, who succumbed to heart failure, was the brilliant young American, Gilmour Wilson."

"Quite right. Savaronoff beat Rubenstein and became Russian champion some years ago. Wilson is said to be a second Capablanca."

"A very curious occurrence," mused Poirot. "If I

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mistake not, you have a particular interest in the matter?"

Japp gave a rather embarrassed laugh.

"You've hit it, Moosior Poirot. I'm puzzled. Wilson was sound as a bell—no trace of heart trouble. His death is quite inexplicable."

"You suspect Dr. Savaronoff of putting him out of the way?" I cried.

"Hardly that," said Japp dryly. "I don't think anyone would murder another man in order not to be beaten at chess—and anyway, from all I can make out, the boot was likely to be on the other leg. The doctor is supposed to be very hot stuff—second to Lasker they say he is."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Then what exactly is your little idea?" he asked. "Why should Wilson be poisoned? For, I assume, of course, that it is poison you suspect."

"Naturally. Heart failure means your heart stops beating—that's all there is to that. That's what a doctor says officially at the moment, but privately he tips us the wink that he's not satisfied," Japp told us.

"When is the autopsy to take place?"

"Tonight. Wilson's death was extraordinarily sudden. He seemed quite as usual and was actually moving one of the pieces when he suddenly fell forward—dead!"

"There are very few poisons would act in such a fashion," objected Poirot.

"I know. The autopsy will help us, I expect. But why should anyone want Gilmour Wilson out of the way—that's what I'd like to know? Harmless unassuming young fellow. Just come over here from the States, and apparently hadn't an enemy in the world."

"It seems incredible," I mused.

"Not at all," said Poirot, smiling. "Japp has his theory, I can see."

"I have, Moosior Poirot. I don't believe the poison was meant for Wilson—it was meant for the other man."

"Savaronoff?"

"Yes. Savaronoff fell foul of the Bolsheviks at the outbreak of the Revolution. He was even reported killed. In reality he escaped, and for three years endured incredible hardships in the wilds of Siberia. His sufferings were so great that he is now a changed man. His friends and acquaintances declare they would hardly have recognized him. His hair is white, and his whole aspect that of a man terribly aged. He is an invalid, and seldom goes out,

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living alone with a niece, Sonia Daviloff, and a Russian manservant in a flat down Westminster way.

"It is possible he still considers himself a marked man. Certainly he was very unwilling to agree to this chess contest. He refused several times and it was only when the newspapers took it up and began making a fuss about his 'unsportsmanlike refusal' that he gave in. Gilmour Wilson had gone on challenging him with real Yankee pertinacity, and in the end he got his way.

"Now I ask you, Moosior Poirot, why wasn't he willing? Because he didn't want attention drawn to him. Didn't want somebody or other to get on his track. That's my solution—Gilmour Wilson got pipped by mistake."

"There is no one who has any private reason to gain by Savaronoff's death?"

"Well, his niece, I suppose. He recently came into an immense fortune. Left him by Madame Gospoja whose husband was a sugar profiteer under the old regime. They had an affair together once, I believe, and she refused steadfastly to credit the reports of his death."

"Where did the match take place?"

"In Savaronoff's own flat. He's an invalid, as I told you."

"Many people there to watch it?"

"At least a dozen—probably more."

Poirot made an expressive grimace.

"My poor Japp, your task is not an easy one."

"Once I know definitely that Wilson was poisoned, I can get on."

"Has it occurred to you that, in the meantime, supposing your assumption that Savaronoff was the intended victim to be correct, the murderer may try again?"

"Of course it has. Two men are watching Savaronoff's flat."

"That will be very useful if anyone should call with a bomb under his arm," said Poirot dryly.

"You're getting interested, Moosior Poirot," said Japp, with a twinkle. "Care to come round to the mortuary and see Wilson's body before the doctors start on it? Who knows, his tiepin may be askew, and that may give you a valuable clue that will solve the mystery."

"My dear Japp, all through dinner my fingers have been itching to rearrange your own tiepin. You permit, yes? Ah, that is much more pleasing to the eye. Yes, by all means, let us go to the mortuary."

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I could see that Poirot's attention was completely captivated by this new problem. It was so long since he had shown any interest over any outside case that I was quite rejoiced to see him back in his old form.

For my own part, I felt a deep pity as I looked down on the motionless form and convulsed face of the hapless young American who had come by his death in such a strange way. Poirot examined the body attentively. There was no mark on it anywhere, except a small scar on the left hand.

"And the doctor says that's a burn, not a cut," explained Japp.

Poirot's attention shifted to the contents of the dead man's pockets which a constable spread out for our inspection. There was nothing much—a handkerchief, keys, wallet filled with notes, and some unimportant letters. But one object standing by itself filled Poirot with interest.

"A chessman!" he exclaimed. "A white bishop. Was that in his pocket?"

"No, clasped in his hand. We had quite a difficulty to get it out of his fingers. It must be returned to Dr. Savaronoff sometime. It's part of a very beautiful set of carved ivory chessmen."

"Permit me to return it to him. It will make an excuse for my going there."

"Aha!" cried Japp. "So you want to come in on this case?"

"I admit it. So skillfully have you aroused my interest."

"That's fine. Got you away from your brooding. Captain Hastings is pleased, too, I can see."

"Quite right," I said, laughing.

Poirot turned back to the body.

"No other little detail you can tell me about—him?" he asked.

"I don't think so."

"Not even—that he was left-handed?"

"You're a wizard, Moosior Poirot. How did you know that? He *was* left-handed. Not that it's anything to do with the case."

"Nothing whatever," agreed Poirot hastily, seeing that Japp was slightly ruffled. "My little joke—that was all. I like to play you the trick, you see."

We went out on an amicable understanding.

The following morning saw us wending our way to Dr. Savaronoff's flat in Westminster.

"Sonia Daviloff," I mused. "It's a pretty name."

Poirot stopped, and threw me a look of despair.

"Always looking for ro-

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mance! You are incorrigible."

The door of the flat was opened to us by a manservant with a peculiarly wooden face. It seemed impossible to believe that impassive countenance could ever display emotion.

Poirot presented a card on which Japp had scribbled a few words of introduction, and we were shown into a low long room furnished with rich hangings and curios. One or two wonderful ikons hung on the walls, and exquisite Persian rugs lay on the floor. A samovar stood on a table.

I was examining one of the ikons which I judged to be of considerable value, and turned to see Poirot prone on the floor. Beautiful as the rug was, it hardly seemed to me to necessitate such close attention.

"Is it such a very wonderful specimen?" I asked.

"Eh? Oh, the rug? But no, it was not the rug I was remarking. But it *is* a beautiful specimen, far too beautiful to have a large nail wantonly driven through the middle of it. No, Hastings," as I came forward, "the nail is not there now. But the hole remains."

A sudden sound behind us made me spin round, and Poirot spring nimbly to his feet. A girl was standing in the doorway. Her eyes, full on us, were dark with suspicion. She was of medium height, with a beautiful, rather sullen face, dark blue eyes, and very black hair which was cut short. Her voice, when she spoke, was rich and sonorous, and completely un-English.

"I fear my uncle will be unable to see you. He is an invalid."

"That is a pity, but perhaps you will kindly help me instead. You are Mademoiselle Daviloff, are you not?"

"Yes, I am Sonia Daviloff. What is it you want to know?"

"I am making some inquiries about that sad affair the night before last—the death of M. Gilmour Wilson. What can you tell me about it?"

The girl's eyes opened wide.

"He died of heart failure—as he was playing chess."

"The police are not so sure that it was—heart failure."

The girl gave a terrified gesture.

"It was true then," she cried. "Ivan was right."

"Who is Ivan, and why do you say he was right?"

"It was Ivan who opened the door to you—and he has already said to me that in his opinion Gilmour Wilson did not die a natural death—that he was poisoned by mistake."

"By mistake?"

"Yes, the poison was meant for my uncle."

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She had quite forgotten her first distrust now, and was speaking eagerly.

"Why do you say that, mademoiselle? Who should wish to poison Dr. Savaronoff?"

"I do not know. I am all in the dark. And my uncle, he will not trust me. It is natural, perhaps. You see, he hardly knows me. He saw me as a child, and not since, till I came to live with him here in London. But this much I do know, he is in fear of something. We have many secret societies in Russia, and one day I overheard something which made me think it was of just such a society he went in fear."

"Mademoiselle, your uncle is still in danger. I must save him. Now recount to me exactly the events of that fatal evening. Show me the chessboard, the table, how the two men sat—everything."

She went to the side of the room and brought out a small table. The top of it was exquisite, inlaid with squares of silver and black to represent a chessboard.

"This was sent to my uncle a few weeks ago as a present, with the request that he would use it in the next match he played. It was in the middle of the room—so."

Poirot examined the table with what seemed to me quite unnecessary attention. He was not conducting the inquiry at all as I would have done. Many of his questions seemed to me pointless, and on really vital matters he seemed to have no questions to ask.

After a minute examination of the table and the exact position it had occupied, he asked to see the chessmen. Sonia Daviloff brought them to him in a box. He examined one or two of them in a perfunctory manner.

"An exquisite set," he murmured absent-mindedly.

Still not a question as to what refreshments there had been, or what people had been present.

I cleared my throat significantly. "Don't you think, Poirot, that—"

He interrupted me peremptorily. "Do not think, my friend. Leave all to me. Mademoiselle, is it quite impossible that I should see your uncle?"

A faint smile showed itself on her face.

"He will see you, yes. You understand, it is my part to interview all strangers first."

She disappeared. I heard a murmur of voices in the next room, and a minute later she came back and motioned us to pass into the adjoining room.

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The man who lay there on a couch was an imposing figure. Tall, gaunt, with huge bushy eyebrows and white beard, and a face haggard as the result of starvation and hardships, Dr. Savaronoff was a distinct personality. I noted the peculiar formation of his head, its unusual height. A great chess player must have a great brain, I knew. I could easily understand Dr. Savaronoff being the second greatest player in the world.

Poirot bowed. "M. le Docteur, may I speak to you alone?"

Savaronoff turned to his niece. "Leave us, Sonia."

She disappeared obediently.

"Now, sir, what is it?"

"Dr. Savaronoff, you have recently come into an enormous fortune. If you should—die unexpectedly, who inherits it?"

"I have made a will leaving everything to my niece, Sonia Daviloff. You do not suggest—"

"I suggest nothing, but you have not seen your niece since she was a child. It would have been easy for someone to impersonate her."

Savaronoff seemed thunderstruck by the suggestion. Poirot went on easily.

"Enough as to that. I give you the word of warning, that is all. What I want you to do now is to describe to me the game of chess the other evening."

"How do you mean—describe it?"

"Well, I do not play the chess myself, but I understand that there are various regular ways of beginning—the gambit, do they not call it?"

Dr. Savaronoff smiled a little.

"Ah, I comprehend you now. Wilson opened Ruy Lopez—one of the soundest openings there is, and one frequently adopted in tournaments and matches."

"And how long had you been playing when the tragedy happened?"

"It must have been about the third or fourth move when Wilson suddenly fell forward over the table, stone dead."

Poirot rose to depart. He flung out his last question as though it was of absolutely no importance, but I knew better.

"Had he had anything to eat or drink?"

"A whiskey and soda, I think."

"Thank you, Dr. Savaronoff. I will disturb you no longer."

Ivan was in the hall to show us out. Poirot lingered on the threshold.

"The flat below this, do you know who lives there?"

"Sir Charles Kingwell, a member of Parliament, sir. It

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has been let furnished lately, though."

"Thank you."

We went out into the bright winter sunlight.

"Well, really, Poirot," I burst out. "I don't think you've distinguished yourself this time. Surely your questions were very inadequate."

"You think so, Hastings?" Poirot looked at me appealingly. "I was *boulverse*, yes. What would you have asked?"

I considered the question carefully, and then outlined my scheme to Poirot. He listened with what seemed to be close interest. My monologue lasted until we had nearly reached home.

"Very excellent, very searching, Hastings," said Poirot, as he inserted his key in the door and preceded me up the stairs. "But quite unnecessary."

"Unnecessary!" I cried, amazed. "If the man was poisoned—"

"Aha," cried Poirot, pouncing on a note which lay on the table. "From Japp. Just as I thought." He flung it over to me. It was brief and to the point. No traces of poison had been found, and there was nothing to show how the man came by his death.

"You see," said Poirot, "your questions would have been quite unnecessary."

"You guessed this beforehand?"

" 'Forecast the probable result of the deal,' " quoted Poirot from a recent bridge problem on which I had spent much time. "*Mon ami*, when you do that successfully, you do not call it guessing."

"Don't let's split hairs," I said impatiently. "You foresaw this?"

"I did."

"Why?"

Poirot put his hand into his pocket and pulled out—a white bishop.

"Why," I cried, "you forgot to give it back to Dr. Savaronoff."

"You are in error, my friend. That bishop still reposes in my left-hand pocket. I took its fellow from the box of chessmen Mademoiselle Daviloff kindly permitted me to examine. The plural of one bishop is two bishops."

He sounded the final "s" with a great hiss. I was completely mystified.

"But why did you take it?"

"*Parbleu*, I wanted to see if they were exactly alike."

He stood them on the table side by side.

"Well, they are, of course," I said, "exactly alike."

Poirot looked at them with his head on one side.

"They seem so, I admit. But

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one should take no fact for granted until it is proved. Bring me, I pray you, my little scales."

With infinite care he weighted the two chessmen, then turned to me with a face alight with triumph.

"I was right. See you, I was right. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot!"

He rushed to the telephone, then waited impatiently.

"Is that Japp? Ah, Japp, it is you. Hercule Poirot speaks. Watch the manservant, Ivan. On no account let him slip through your fingers. Yes, yes, it is as I say."

He dashed down the receiver and turned to me.

"You see it not, Hastings? I will explain. Wilson was not poisoned, he was electrocuted. A thin metal rod passed up the middle of one of those chessmen. The table was prepared beforehand and set upon a certain spot on the floor. When the bishop was placed upon one of the silver squares, the current passed through Wilson's body, killing him instantly. The only mark was the electric burn upon his hand—his left hand, because he was left-handed.

"The 'special table' was an extremely cunning piece of mechanism. The table I examined was a duplicate, perfectly innocent. It was substituted for the other immediately after the murder. The thing was worked from the flat below, which, if you remember, was let furnished. But one accomplice at least was in Savaronoff's flat. The girl is an agent of a Russian secret society, working to inherit Savaronoff's money."

"And Ivan?"

"I strongly suspect that Ivan is the girl's confederate."

"It's amazing," I said. "Everything fits in. Savaronoff had an inkling of the plot, and that's why he was so averse to playing the match."

Poirot looked at me without speaking. Then he turned abruptly away, and began pacing up and down.

"Have you a book on chess by any chance, *mon ami?*" he asked suddenly.

"I believe I have somewhere."

It took me some time to ferret it out, but I found it at last and brought it to Poirot, who sank down in a chair and started reading it with the greatest attention.

In about a quarter of an hour the telephone rang. I answered it, It was Japp. Ivan had left the flat, carrying a large bundle. He had sprung into a waiting taxi, and the chase had begun. He was evidently trying to lose his pursuers. In the end

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he seemed to fancy that he had done so, and had then driven to a big empty house at Hampstead. The house was surrounded.

I recounted all this to Poirot. He merely stared at me as though he scarcely took in what I was saying. He held out the chess book.

"Listen to this, my friend. This is the Ruy Lopez opening. 1 P-K4, P-K4; 2 Kt-KB3, Kt-QB3; 3B-Kt5;? Then there comes a question as to Black's best third move. He has the choice of various defenses. It was White's third move that killed Gilmour Wilson, 3B-Kt5. Only the third move—does that say nothing to you?"

I hadn't the least idea what he meant, and told him so.

"I suppose, Hastings, that while you were sitting in this chair, you heard the front door being opened and shut. What would you think?"

"I should think someone had gone out, I suppose."

"Yes—but there are always two ways of looking at things. Someone gone out—someone come *in*—two totally different things, Hastings. But if you assumed the wrong one, presently some little discrepancy would creep in and show that you were on the wrong track."

"What does all this mean, Poirot?"

Poirot sprang to his feet with sudden energy.

"It means that I have been a triple imbecile. Quick, quick, to the flat in Westminster. We may yet be in time."

We tore off in a taxi. Poirot returned no answer to my excited questions. We raced up the stairs. Repeated rings and knocks brought no reply, but listening closely I could distinguish a hollow groan coming from inside.

The hall porter proved to have a master key, and after a few difficulties he consented to use it.

Poirot went straight to the inner room. A whiff of chloroform met us. On the floor was Sonia Daviloff, gagged and bound, with a great wad of saturated cotton wool over her nose and mouth. Poirot tore it off and began to take measures to restore her. Presently a doctor arrived, and Poirot handed her over to his charge and drew aside with me. There was no sign of Dr. Savaronoff.

"What does it all mean?" I asked, bewildered.

"It means that of two equal deductions I chose the wrong one. You heard me say that it would be easy for someone to impersonate Sonia Daviloff because her uncle had not seen her for so many years?"

"Yes?"

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"Well, precisely the opposite held good also. It was equally easy for someone to *impersonate the uncle!*"

"What?"

"Savaronoff *did* die at the outbreak of the Revolution. The man who pretended to have escaped with such terrible hardships, the man so changed 'that his own friends could hardly recognize him,' the man who successfully laid claim to an enormous fortune—is an impostor. He guessed I should get on the right track in the end, so he sent off the honest Ivan on a tortuous wild goose chase, chloroformed the girl, and got out, having by now doubtless realized most of the fortune left by Madame Gospoja."

"But—but who tried to kill him then?"

"Nobody tried to kill *him.* Wilson was the intended victim all along."

"But why?"

"My friend, Savaronoff was the second greatest chess player in the world. In all probability his impersonator did not even know the rudiments of the game. Certainly he could *not* sustain the fiction of a match. He tried all he knew to avoid the contest. When that failed, Wilson's doom was sealed. At all costs he must be prevented from discovering that the great Savaronoff did not even know how to play chess. Wilson was fond of the Ruy Lopez opening, and was certain to use it. The false Savaronoff arranged for death to come with the third move, before any complications of defense set in."

"But, my dear Poirot," I persisted, "are we dealing with a lunatic? I quite follow your reasoning and admit that you must be right, but to kill a man just to sustain his role! Surely there were simpler ways out of the difficulty than that? He could have said that his doctor forbade the strain of a match."

Poirot wrinkled his forehead.

"*Certainement,* Hastings," he said, "there were other ways, but none so convincing. Besides, you are assuming that to kill a man is a thing to avoid, are you not? Our impostor's mind, it does not act that way. I put myself in his place, a thing impossible for you. I picture his thoughts. He enjoys himself as the professor at that match. I doubt not he has secretly visited the chess tourneys to study his part.

"He *sits* and frowns in thought; he gives the impression that he is thinking great plans, and all the time he laughs in himself. He is aware that two moves are all that he knows—and all that he *need know.*

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Again, it would appeal to his mind to foresee the events and to make the man his own executioner . . . Oh, yes, Hastings, I begin to understand our friend and his psychology."

I shrugged. "Well, I suppose you're right, but I can't understand anyone running a risk he could so easily have avoided."

"Risk!" Poirot snorted. "Where then lay the risk? Would Japp have solved the problem? No; if the false Savaronoff had not made one small mistake he would have run no risk."

"And his mistake?" I asked, although I suspected the answer.

"*Mon ami*, he overlooked the little gray cells of Hercule Poirot."

Poirot has his virtues, but modesty is not one of them.

CRIMINALIMERICK

PRISONER IN A LITTLE GRAY CELL

by D. R. BENSEN

"*Nom d'un nom!* I am badly annoyed;
It's a slip of the mind *a la* Freud;
To my shame and my sorrow,"
Exclaimed Hercule Poirot,
"I forget who killed Roger Ackroyd!"

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a newly discovered story by

ANTHONY BOUCHER

his last crime story?

So far as we know, Anthony Boucher wrote only two stories that have not yet appeared in print. One was a Nick Noble short story which EQMM purchased in October 1943, but which, for reasons that cannot be disclosed at this time, was never published; perhaps one of these issues we'll bring you this story, titled "Death of a Patriarch."

The second unpublished story was discovered after Mr. Boucher's death in 1968. Evidence indicates that the story was written in 1961 and was probably the last crime story that Anthony Boucher wrote. For unknown, perhaps unknowable reasons Mr. Boucher put the manuscript aside, never getting around to sending it to EQMM, or even to giving the story a title; the present title was chosen by your Editor.

Here, then, is a "find" for mystery fans in general and for Boucher fans in particular. It is a story about Jack the Ripper—but a Ripper "revelation" with, as one would have expected from Anthony Boucher, a "difference"...

A KIND OF MADNESS

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

In 1888 London was terrified, as no city has been before or since, by Jack the Ripper, who from April through November killed and dissected at least seven prostitutes, without leaving a single clue to his identity.

The chain of murders snapped abruptly. After 1888 Jack never ripped again. Because on July 12, 1889...

He paused on the steps of University College, surrounded

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by young ladies prattling the questions that were supposed to prove they had paid careful attention to his lecture-demonstration.

The young ladies were, he knew as a biologist, human females; dissection would establish the fact beyond question. But for him womankind was divided into three classes: angels and devils and students. He had never quite forgiven the college for admitting women nine years ago. That these female creatures should irrelevantly possess the same terrible organs that were the arsenal of the devils, the same organs through which the devils could strike lethally at the angels, the very organs which he . . .

He answered the young ladies without hearing either their questions or his answers, detached himself from the bevy, and strolled toward the Euston Road.

For eight months now he had seen neither angel nor devil. The events of 1888 seemed infinitely remote, like a fever remembered after convalescence. It had indeed been a sort of fever of the brain, perhaps even—he smiled gently—a kind of madness. But after his own angel had died of that unspeakable infection which the devil had planted in him—which had affected him so lightly but had penetrated so fatally to those dread organs which render angels vulnerable to devils . . .

He observed, clinically, that he was breathing heavily and that his hand was groping in his pocket—a foolish gesture, since he had not carried the scalpel for eight months. Deliberately he slowed his pace and his breathing. The fever was spent—though surely no sane man could see anything but good in an effort to rid London of its devils.

"Pardon, m'sieur."

The woman was young, no older than his students, but no one would mistake her for a female of University College. Even to his untutored eye her clothes spoke of elegance and chic and, in a word, Paris. Her delicate scent seemed no man-made 'otto* but pure *essence de femme.* Her golden hair framed a piquant face, the nose slightly tilted, the upper lip a trifle full—irregular but delightful.

"Ma'm'selle?" he replied, with courtesy and approbation.

"If m'sieur would be so kind as to help a stranger in your great city . . . I seek an establishment of baggages."

*A word only Anthony Boucher would use. Originally he wrote "attar"; but he crossed that out and substituted "otto."

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He tried to suppress his smile, but she noticed it, and a response sparkled in her eyes. "Do I say something improper?" she asked almost hopefully.

"Oh, no. Your phrase is quite correct. Most Englishmen, however, would say 'a luggage shop.' "

"Ah, *c'est ca.* 'A luggage shop'—I shall remember me. I am on my first voyage to England, though I have known Englishmen at Paris. I feel like a small child in a world of adults who talk strangely. Though I know"—his gaze was resting on what the French politely call the throat—"I am not shaped like one."

An angel, he was thinking. Beyond doubt an angel, and a delectable one. And this innocently provocative way of speaking made her seem only the more angelic.

He took from her gloved fingers the slip of paper on which was written the address of the "establishment of baggages."

"You are at the wrong end of the Euston Road," he explained. "Permit me to hail a cab for you; it is too far to walk on such a hot day."

"Ah, yes, this is a July of Julys, is it not? One has told me that in England it is never hot, but behold I sweat!"

He frowned.

"Oh, do I again say something beastly? But it is true: I do sweat." Tiny moist beads outlined her all but invisible blonde mustache.

He relaxed. "As a professor of biology I should be willing to acknowledge the fact that the human female is equipped with sweat glands, even though proper English usage would have it otherwise. Forgive me, my dear child, for frowning at your innocent impropriety."

She hesitated, imitating his frown. Then she looked up, laughed softly, and put her small plump hand on his arm. "As a token of forgiveness, m'sieur, you may buy me an ice before hailing my cab. My name," she added, "is Gaby."

He felt infinitely refreshed. He had been wrong, he saw it now, to abstain so completely from the company of women once his fever had run its course. There was a delight, a solace, in the presence of a woman. Not a student, or a devil, but the true woman: an angel.

Gaby daintily dabbed ice and sweat from her full upper lip and rose from the table. "M'sieur has been most courteous to the stranger within his gates. And now I must seek my luggage shop."

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"Mademoiselle Gaby—"

"Hein? Speak up, m'sieur le professeur. Is it that you wish to ask if we shall find each other again?"

"I should indeed be honoured if while you are in London—"

"Merde alors!" She winked at him, and he hoped that he had misunderstood her French. "Do we need such fine phrases? I think we understand ourselves, no? There is a small bistro—a pub, you call it?—near my lodgings. If you wish to meet me there tomorrow evening . . ." She gave him instructions. Speechless, he noted them down.

"You will not be sorry, m'sieur. I think well you will enjoy your little tour of France after your dull English diet."

She held his arm while he hailed a cab. He did not speak except to the cabman. She extended her ungloved hand and he automatically took it. Her fingers dabbled deftly in his palm while her pink tongue peered out for a moment between her lips. Then she was gone.

"And I thought her an angel," he groaned.

His hand fumbled again in his empty pocket.

The shiny new extra large trunk dominated the bedroom. Gabrielle Bompard stripped to the skin as soon as the porter had left (more pleased with her wink than with her tip) and perched on the trunk. The metal trim felt refreshingly cold against her flesh.

Michel Eyraud looked up lazily from the bed where he was sprawled. "I never get tired of looking at you, Gaby."

"When you are content just to look," Gaby grinned, "I cut your throat."

"It's hot," said Eyraud.

"I know, and you are an old man. You are old enough to be my father. You are a very wicked lecherous old man, but for old men it is often hot."

Eyraud sprang off the bed, strode over to the trunk, and seized her by her naked shoulders. She laughed in his face. "I was teasing you. It *is* too hot. Even for me. Go lie down and tell me about your day. You got everything?"

Eyraud waved an indolent hand at the table. A coil of rope, a block and tackle, screws, screwdriver . . .

Gaby smiled approvingly. "And I have the trunk, such a nice big one, and this." She reached for her handbag, drew out a red-and-white girdle. "It goes well with my dressing gown. And it is strong." She stretched it and tugged at it, grunting enthusiastically.

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Eyraud looked from the girdle to the rope to the pulley to the top of the door leading to the sitting room, then back to the trunk. He nodded.

Gaby stood by the full-length mirror contemplating herself. "That silly bailiff, that Gouffé. Why does he dare to think that Gaby should be interested in him? This Gaby, such as you behold her . . ." She smiled at the mirror and nodded approval.

"I met a man," she said. "An Englishman. Oh, so very stiff and proper. He looks like Phileas Fogg in Jules Verne's *Le Tour du Monde.* He wants me."

"Fogg had money," said Eyraud. "Lots of it."

"So does my professor . . . Michi?"

"Yes?"

Gabrielle pirouetted before the mirror. "Am I an actress?"

"All women are actresses."

"Michi, do not try to be clever. It is not becoming to you. Am I an actress?"

Eyraud lit a French cigarette and tossed the blue pack to Gaby. "You're a performer, an entertainer. You have better legs than any actress in Paris. And if you made old Gouffé think you love him for his fat self . . . Yes, I guess you're an actress."

"Then I know what I want." Gaby's eyelids were half closed. "Michi, I want a rehearsal."

Eyraud looked at the trunk and the block and tackle and the red-and-white girdle. He laughed, heartily and happily.

He found her waiting for him in the pub. The blonde hair picked up the light and gave it back, to form a mocking halo around the pert devil's face.

His fingers reassured him that the scalpel was back where it belonged. He had been so foolish to call "a fever" what was simply his natural rightful temperature. It was his mission in life to rid the world of devils. That was the simple truth. And not all devils had cockney accents and lived in Whitechapel.

"Be welcome, m'sieur le professeur." She curtseyed with impish grace. "You have thirst?"

"No," he grunted.

"Ah, you mean you do not have thirst in the throat. It lies lower, hein?" She giggled, and he wondered how long she had been waiting in the pub. She laid her hand on his arm. The animal heat seared through his sleeve. "I go upstairs. You understand, it is more chic when you do not see me make myself ready. You ascend in a dozen of minutes. It is on the first floor, at the left to the rear."

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He left the pub and waited on the street. The night was cool and the fog was beginning to settle down. On just such a night in last August . . . What was her name? He had read it later in *The Times.* Martha Tabor? Tabby? Tabbypussy-devil

He had nicked his finger on the scalpel. As he sucked the blood he heard a clock strike. He had been waiting almost a half hour; where had the time gone? The devil would be impatient.

The sitting room was dark, but subdued lamplight gleamed from the bedroom. The bed was turned down. Beside it stood a huge trunk.

The devil was wearing a white dressing gown and a red-and-white girdle that emphasized its improbably slender waist. It came toward him and stroked his face with hot fingers and touched its tongue like a branding iron to his chin and ears and at last his lips. His hands closed around its waist.

"Ouf!" gasped the devil. "You may crush *me,* I assure you, m'sieur. I love that. But please to spare my pretty new girdle. Perhaps if I debarrass myself of it . . ." It unclasped the girdle and the dressing gown fell open.

His hand took a firm grip on the scalpel.

The devil moved him toward the door between the two rooms. It festooned the girdle around his neck. "Like that," it said gleefully. "There—doesn't that make you a pretty red-and-white cravat?"

Hand and scalpel came out of his pocket.

And Michel Eyraud, standing in the dark sitting room, fastened the ends of the girdle to the rope running through the block and tackle and gave a powerful jerk.

The rope sprang to the ceiling, the girdle followed it, and the professor's thin neck snapped. The scalpel fell from his dead hand.

The rehearsal had been a complete success.

Just as they planned to do with the bailiff Gouffé, they stripped the body and plundered the wallet. "Not bad," said Eyraud. "Do actresses get paid for rehearsing?"

"This one does," said Gaby. And they dumped the body in the trunk.

Later the clothes would be disposed of in dustbins, the body carried by trunk to some quiet countryside where it might decompose in naked namelessness.

Gaby swore when she stepped on the scalpel. "What the hell is this?" She picked it up. "It's sharp. Do you suppose

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he was one of those types who like a little blood to heighten their pleasures? I've heard of them but never met one."

Gaby stood pondering, her dressing gown open . . .

The first night, to the misfortune of the bailiff Gouffé, went off as smoothly as the rehearsal. But the performers reckoned without the patience and determination and génie policier of Marie-Francois Goron, Chief of the Paris Sûreté.

The upshot was, as all aficionados of true crime know, that Eyraud was guillotined, nineteen months after the rehearsal, and Gaby, who kept grinning at the jury, was sentenced to twenty years of hard labour.

When Goron was in London before the trial, he paid his usual courtesy call at Scotland Yard and chatted at length with Inspector Frederick G. Abberline.

"Had one rather like yours recently ourselves," said Abberline. "Naked man, broken neck, left to rot in the countryside. Haven't succeeded in identifying him yet. You were luckier there."

"It is notorious," Goron observed, "that the laboratories of the French police are the best in the world."

"We do very well, thank you," said Abberline distantly.

"Of course." The French visitor was all politeness. "As you did last year in that series of Whitechapel murders."

"I don't know if you're being sarcastic, Mr. Goron, but no police force in the world could have done more than we did in the Ripper case. It was a nightmare with no possible resolution. And unless he strikes again, it's going to go down as one of the greatest unsolved cases in history. Jack the Ripper will never hang."

"Not," said M. Goron, "so long as he confines his attention to the women of London." He hurried to catch the boat train, thinking of Gabrielle Bompard and feeling a certain regret that such a woman was also such a devil.

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a *NEW* Inspector Seal (Ret.) story

by JOHN PIERCE

Between rounds on the golf course that day, over beer and sandwiches in the walnut-paneled lounge of the clubhouse, Inspector Seal (Ret.) told them of three cases in his personal archives, in his Collection of Strange Crimes—the first about a cerebral criminologist, the second about a tough private eye, the third about an international-troubleshooter-undercover-secret-agent—three different 'tec types seen through one-way windshields tinted with irony . . .

INSPECTOR SEAL REMINISCES

by JOHN PIERCE

Not all went well that day. Claxton blamed the uncut fairways, Pentel an indifferent caddie. Seal blamed the slow play of the foursome ahead of them. Hurdis blamed Seal.

"Why blame Seal?" asked Pentel.

"Hurdis claims Seal was distracting him."

"Distracting him how?"

"Talking about some strange cases."

"Cases of what?"

"Cases of ulcers," grumbled Hurdis, catching up with them outside the pro shop. "Telling his moldy crime stories while I'm trying to play golf."

"Tut tut, now," tutted Seal, the retired Inspector. He followed them around the practise putting green. They mounted stairs and crossed the Colonial veranda to a door. Inside was the walnut-paneled lounge overlooking the fifth and ninth greens. All their scores were discouraging. They had opted for cold beer and sandwiches before assaulting the second nine.

"What crime cases, Albert?" Pentel asked Claxton. Pentel, a retired dentist, had just moved south from Canada. Unused to their internecine insults, he was timid and extremely polite.

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"Strange cases in his personal archives," Claxton replied.

"Strange how?"

"Never got to hear. He never finished telling them. Ask Seal."

"No, you don't," said Seal, rejoining them after a delay at the door. "You asked me for them, Albert. I tried to oblige. Now everyone's blaming me for his quadruple bogeys."

"I assure you I wasn't," said Pentel.

"Only Hurdis, and he needed a good excuse anyway." Claxton winked. "I'm in favor of hearing them now."

"Hear hear. If it bothers no one," said Pentel.

"Well, do it before we start playing," relented Hurdis.

They placed their orders with a white-jacketed waiter. Seal watched a lady prepare to putt on the fifth green.

"Some years ago I began collecting crime cases I thought unacceptably strange. I keep them in a special file. Here are three of them:

DR. BRIGGS

"Ever hear of Dr. Briggs of Chicago?"

No one had.

"Surprised. Only Doctor of Psychology doing business as a private eye in the whole city of Chicago. Dapper, goateed, a whip with the wealthy women. Where he really shone, though, was in the exploitation of a number of ideas he'd picked up in a study of kinesics. Acquainted with kinesics, anyone?"

No one was.

"Deplorable. Kinesics. Call it, for our purposes, the study and analysis of nonlinguistic motions—shrugs, gestures, nervous twitches, and so on—as they pertain to the process of communication. Briggs went on from there until *he* had a system for making capital out of physical mannerisms whether it had to do with overt communication or not.

"Briggs, in other words, learned to study the client or suspect before him and cut through evasions and subterfuges by his brilliance in seizing on the most seemingly insignificant anomaly—a head in curlers, a ring on an unusual finger, a broken shoelace. Wildly successful. Had to be for them to call him that afternoon in reference to the search for the Topaz Madonna—"

"The what?" asked Claxton.

"Never heard of the Topaz Madonna? Inexcusable. Lloyds seemed to think it worth ten million on the basis of its historicity alone. Carved in the catacombs, appropriated by the early Popes, stolen by the Saracens, then lost to Richard

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in the Third Crusade. To John, to Philip II, to the Turks, then to the Krakow cathedral.

"Incredible tale of superstition, blood, and human greed. Brought finally to America in the 1870s where it resided with a wealthy family before being stolen when the *Lusitania* went down. Traced to Hong Kong, disappeared into China, then the trail was lost. They spent millions tracking it down. Fantastically wealthy family. Colorado mining fortune. Name of Todt."

"Never heard of them," said Hurdis.

"Daresay you haven't. Recluses all. By that is meant, recluses. Busybodies and journalists have grown old and died trying to penetrate their secretiveness. No records seem to exist telling of births and deaths or the size of the family. Their names are not found on property records and like many of our best millionaires they are not asked to pay taxes. It is not even known where they live. Rumor says an underground palace in the Rockies with private islands in the South Seas and off Africa. Rumor says they travel only at night, in disguises, on black unlit airplanes that take off and land on private fields.

"Enough of the Todts. Enough to explain Briggs's excitement on that snowy afternoon when the anonymous voice ten or twelve rungs down that misty chain of command dialed his phone and said, 'Topaz Madonna.' The dreams in his head. Worldwide fame. Marriage to the Todt heiress, if there was one. Feverishly Briggs jotted down the instructions: pick up train ticket to San Francisco at information booth. Take Golden Carpet Special departing five P.M. Sit anywhere, wait for contact. End of call."

The waiter brought their sandwiches.

"Terrible time for a train trip, as Briggs quickly found. Blizzard had closed airports and highways, sending all that poor flotsam to fight for seats on the train. No sleeping cars, no diner, and halfway across Illinois the heating system failed. There was Briggs hunched in his overcoat in a lounge car where no drinks were being served. Lights too dim for much reading, bitter cold.

"To keep himself occupied he started to observe: the hard-eyed spinster with the tight, ascetic mouth; the two college girls in peek-a-boo hairstyles, nothing visible but their noses; the man in a corner with hat over his eyes and blanket wrapped around him, his exposed left hand dangling a

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paperback book; the oldster holding a dialogue with himself. At last, toward midnight, Briggs slept.

"Woke and slept. Woke to find himself practically alone in the car. He quickly divined the reason. Outside, the storm had cleared and passengers were bailing out—to head back to the airports or bus terminals or to find accommodations with food and heat. Not yet dawn. Train six hours late. Noticed then that the man under the blanket was still there. This was just as the man addressed him from under his downtilted hat. He said:

" 'Who needs America's railroads?'

"The password! Then it wasn't some practical joke as Briggs had begun to fear. Here was he and here was—he blurted out the countersign, said to have been profane.

" 'You are Briggs?'

"Briggs was.

" 'I am asked to speak to you.'

" 'Yes.'

" 'You know the nature of the quest?'

"Briggs did.

" 'The high price put on the object?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'And you know why you were selected?'

" 'I know my abilities.'

" 'You are known for your discerning eye.'

" 'I have had some success.'

" 'Let us play a game then as a precondition to your employment. Tell me what you know of me. Then I'll reply.'

"Not laughing derisively was Briggs's hardest chore. Clownish boor, with blanket wrapped around him and face under his hat and cheap pants and workingman's shoes worn to throw Briggs further off the track. He'd settle him. He'd come out with the whole truth.

" 'Come on, come on,' prompted the man, hunched deep in the corner.

" 'From your youth,' Briggs began, 'no love lost between you and your father. Severe disciplinarian, wasn't he? Too much so. Led you down the road to chronic alcoholism. Let me, however, congratulate you for having arrested that weakness. Getting well free of it, aren't you? Quit smoking at last, too.'

"They had slid through a small town. In the open, in the snowfields, the train seemed to be slowing. 'Fantastic,' the gentleman said, shaking his head in disbelief. 'Unbelievable. Will you share it with me, the process of your reasoning?'

" 'Happy to,' Briggs answered, starting now to resent the man. All night he'd shivered to

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death in this wretched car in subzero weather while Mr. X, whoever he was, played his unnecessary game. Tempted as he was to point out that bully begat bully in a family, he thought he had gone far enough. 'You were hidden from me but your left hand holding the book was not. Easy to ascertain by a lack of adeptness in that hand that you are not left-handed, but being jammed against the wall on your right—and there between the middle finger and forefinger of your left hand are those nicotine stains. Commonest thing in the world, the young lad who takes up smoking against parental wishes and tries to conceal it by assigning the function to his other hand—that is, the hand with which he does not wield cutlery at the family table, the hand he can hide in his lap.'

" 'Yes, I see. Remarkable. And the alcohol, and how you knew I'd stopped drinking and stopped smoking, too?'

" 'Twice as easy. Note yourself where the nicotine stains are. Not between the first and second joints, as with the average smoker, but down at the juncture of the fingers, clear down at the webbing. I have seen it too often. Who holds a cigarette this way? Junkies, alcoholics, people on pills, those who've had the dubious good fortune to go to sleep smoking and set mattresses on fire. Those who've been forced to learn that a cigarette held naturally can too easily fall free. But not one, as you discovered, held at the juncture. Shake your hand, dangle it, do anything, that cigarette will burn your fingers before escaping your hand.'

"Briggs demonstrated with a cigarette of his own. 'As to how I know you've quit drinking—all night we've been on a lounge car; all night there was the possibility that the bar might be opened. You alone did not cast your eyes there from time to time, as did the other passengers. Nor did you once smoke a cigarette.'

"Briggs relaxed, his case rested. The train was stopping. Why in the middle of a flat snowfield at the crack of dawn?

" 'Good God,' said the man with the blanket. He was getting to his feet. 'Do enjoy your trip, Mr. Briggs. Perhaps in Omaha you'll be able to get a plane back to Chicago. At your own expense, I'm afraid.'

"Briggs gaped.

" 'My father, for your records, died four months before I was born. I have never had a drink of any alcoholic beverage. Holding my cigarettes where I do, I am able to, at the

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same time, use a pen. Goodbye and thank you for your contribution to the most awful twelve hours of my life.'

"Briggs didn't understand. Barely noticed what was on the snowfield outside the window—the black airplane on skis and the cluster of men standing at attention.

"Then he did. The man in the blanket had got off. He was casting aside the blanket as he walked toward the plane. He had no right arm."

In the silence of the walnut-paneled lounge there came the loud play of jaws on potato chips. The perpetrator wore a guest pass and read a magazine. There was too much of that in the country club—too many outsiders eating vulgar foods.

When Hurdis spoke it was very carefully, each syllable metallic and gleaming. "Happy now, Claxton?"

"It was not what I expected," Claxton admitted.

"It does fit the word 'strange,'" ventured Pentel politely.

"'Unacceptably strange,' I believe the terminology was," Hurdis said. "Do go ahead, Inspector Seal."

Seal obliged, but with a qualification. In the case of Murdock much of the tale's uniqueness lay in the idiom within which Murdock lived and spoke. They would pardon him if he referred mentally to his files for that idiom:

MURDOCK

It was 65 floors of tinted glass on the south side of town. I left the Jag at a No Parking and flipped a wadded five to a doorman dressed like Wellington leading the Mardi Gras parade. I blew a kiss to the newsstand girl in the fake-marble lobby, dropped a single on the elevator starter, and took a fast ride to the forty-eighth floor.

Vulcan, Inc. was behind double-tinted glass doors you could have flown a small airplane through if the doors were open and they'd have let you. But they never would. They probably had nightmares about someone dropping a cigar ash on the three-inch pile of synthetic carpetry or knocking a leaf off a plastic plant around the real-life waterfall under the ersatz Rousseau painting that was some decorator's idea of class. It was classy, all right. It was about as classy as the finals of the Choctaw County baton-twirling contest.

The sign on the wide crescent desk read Cindye Barlowe. She had not seen me

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through the wax flowers and plastic leaves of the pseudo-jungle. She had copper-blonde hair and wore a sheer red nylon product that drew you in for a closer look at a cleavage like the Royal Gorge. She had run out of typing to do, if she ever had any, and was buffing her little crimson nails on the formica desktop. I shoved my hat back, moved the sign away, sat on her desk, spread my hands flat, and leaned over the neckline to give her a great big leer.

"A man could get lost down there."

"How would you know, stinkpot? Off the desk."

"I feel safer here," I grinned, indicating the phony plastic jungle. "I've hated tropical plants ever since the Marines."

She liked it. She just didn't want to say so. "Since the Marines what flushed you from under one? Off the desk, big mouth, unless you want a hatpin through the groin."

Maybe she had accidentally toed the buzzer. Maybe he had closed-circuit TV. I was reaching for the zipper behind her neck when the panel door opened and he stood there in his shantungs and bland face with the little mouth that could have cut rivets for the Shipyard Division. He was chief assistant front man for Hector Stone of Vulcan, Inc. and he didn't care who knew it. His little gimlet eyes were on me.

"You Murdock?"

Was I Murdock. I had a card. With my fingers I bent it like the case ace until it popped loose and flew over the bogus orchids and knifed him across the bridge of his nose. It's an old trick I know. I left Cindye to her fluttered breathing and followed him.

His windows overlooked the right side of town. He did not sit down. "You are late. I've little time. Before calling you we made inquiries into your qualifications. They are not what we'd accept for our lowest office boy, but it is said, or we have learned, that the calling of private snoop—or hired peeping tom or voyeur, if you will—seldom depletes the ranks of the well-bred or overly intelligent or even semiliterate for its operatives, a truth you yourself have just demonstrated. But one takes what one gets."

I blew smoke at his face. "Especially when 'one' has gotten 'oneself' into such a nasty little cesspool that 'one' can't afford to call the cops, right?"

He fanned the smoke away. "Your ignorance is suffocating, Murdock. Do try to contain it. I've very little time. Mr. Stone *is* the police, and the Senate and the Supreme Court as far as

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his locale is concerned. His dominion, regrettably for me at this moment, does not extend beyond the continental boundaries. Please tell me what you know, if anything, about a girl named Rosetta Stone."

"Stone's daughter and heiress. Or was before she got kidnaped five years ago on her seventeenth birthday. Held for two million ransom, nationwide press and TV coverage. Ransom paid but no Rosetta. Believed dead and buried, or dunked at sea."

"Exactly what was meant to be believed. No, Miss Stone is very much alive, operating behind the Iron Curtain. Her stay there has been most productive. She has complete data on certain Soviet missilery and that data must be gotten out immediately. Naturally the government cannot be involved. It must be done quickly. Here's the reason."

He handed me a clipping from a Turkish newspaper. I read the caption and whistled through my teeth. Pictured in the raw was 125 pounds of 46-24-35 if I ever saw it. She was, said the caption, Anna Dubrovna, newly crowned Miss Nude Bulgaria of 1971. I tapped the cheesecake. "Rosetta Stone?"

He nodded. "However she got roped into such a thing, she's endangered herself and world civilization, such as it is. Let that picture be picked up by the United States press and have her recognized as Stone's daughter and she's dead. I believe you speak Bulgarian."

"Parachuted in with the O.S.S. during Big Brawl Deuce."

He pressed a wall button and a map of the Middle East descended. "She's in a fishing village, Kzyl Krodnski, up here on the Black Sea south of Varna. She lives with an old couple who found her wandering through a forest not long after her 'kidnaping.' Only way of getting up there is by sea through the Dardanelles. For that Stone's laid on a Hergensheim-Bendemer three-man sub, being flown in to this Greek island tonight. I believe you're checked out on the Hergensheim."

I was looking at his pointer on the Greek island. "Not twenty miles from this island, Agnopolis. Good. I'll need Xorba. Why 'his boys'?"

"Wasn't sure you knew Xorba. Why 'his boys?' "

"Saved his life during the Venezuelan caper. Need his boys for a diversionary a few miles inland while we nose the sub up the coast."

Know *Xorba?* You made it with Xorba, Greece was yours. I

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saw again that village on the granite hill among the olive and cypress and carob trees and the smell of the orange blossoms and Mama Kokoryphos running her bulk out from her little café to embrace me, shouting, "Murdock," and my name echoing from the hills and the coast below and all of them running to surround me.

I smelled the roast lamb and suckling pigs and chestnuts in the brazier and figs and pomegranates and cheeses and bowls of olives and the gourds of raki and red wine while the tambourines and flute music and the *santuri* goaded them to their dance around the ceremonial fire; and there was Xorba, perspiration flowing, light as a cat on his bare feet, muscles rippling as he segued into the *Zeimbekiko* to the clapping of hands, feet stamping, wine flowing, made to dance, having to dance, dancing undancing, shaking-earth unshaking, sky-splitting, and from the mud doorway the dark cool eyes of Maria and Xorba peeling off to fall on me in his exhaustion, arms about me, "You have come back, *amigo!*"

Amigo?

"Am I boring you, Murdock?" Stone's man said.

"Probably," I said. "You want the girl out, I'll get her out."

"I said that a packet with detailed instructions will be handed to you on your arrival. Briefly, though, if you'd care to listen, you'll pick the girl up and get out fast, after which Xorba delivers the two of you to *this* island in the Black Sea before taking off with the sub on his own. There's a cabin on the island stocked with all you'll need for a month's stay. Your job there is to guard the girl and the papers until such time as we pick you up. I have a meeting now. I believe the fee decided on will be satisfactory. To Mr. Stone the rescue of his daughter and the secrets she carries will be worth one million to you, tax free. Plus the usual liberal expense allowance, of course."

I sat on his desk and looked for an ashtray. There wasn't one. I used the little bowl with his paper clips. "Assuming I take the job."

"Well, you'd better make up your mind as of this minute."

"Or you'll what? Go get her out yourself? What you do is see if you can catch Stone between champagne and sauna bath and ask him this." I let him sweat before throwing the kicker. "Let's have a definition of 'liberal expense allowance.' Or what does he think I'm going to pay Xorba and his boys with, chocolate bars and

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Woolworth pocket mirrors?"

"And I'm saying that unless you catch tomorrow night's tide and tomorrow night's no-moon there won't be any—"

"You know my number," I grinned and left him stammering. I went out past Cindye and through the plastic jungle to the elevator. Cindye would keep. Right now I'd better save what I had for Miss Nude Bulgaria and a month on that wine-growing island.

In the lobby they backed away when they saw my face. Just as well, I'd tipped away my last dollar. In the office I let up the windowshade, brushed away some dead flies, pulled the company bottle from a desk drawer, and sat down to wait by the phone. Never deal with a billionaire without holding a kicker. It's all those guys respect. I poured another shot and leered at the telephone.

All were rigid in their chairs in the walnut-paneled lounge, their eyes fixed on the picture window.

"And?" said Claxton.

"And? That's all."

"*All?*" said the three.

"All as far as Murdock was concerned. Unknown to him they had just disconnected his telephone for nonpayment. Stone's man couldn't get him, so they found someone else."

"Served him right, I'd think," said Pentel politely.

"There's a Murdock in the old Finch Building who's said to have had some kind of connection with the law. Does tattooing and hair removal."

"Could be the same fellow," Seal said.

A phone call from the club pro told them the tenth tee was clear. They adjourned to the locker room for their shoes and clubs.

"Pray don't stop now," said Hurdis gleefully. "Tell Albert the third tale before we reach the tee."

"Glad you reminded me," said Seal.

DEVEREAUX, THOMAS J.

"You say the Russians are preparing to attack with nuclear weapons? Good God, Charlie, where and when?"

"That's what we don't know, Tom, and you're the only man in the world who can stop it."

Devereaux stared in consternation at his host, framed in the window against the Capitol dome. If he was right it meant—it meant—good God. And Tiff gone skiing in Vermont and no way to reach her. His jaws tightened. "Who else knows about this? Tell me what I can do."

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"Me, you, the Chief," Hansen said. "Way it has to stay if we don't want mass panic."

"Where is he?"

"Underground White House, the Rockies. He'll call us."

Hansen pressed a wall button. A map of Asia descended. He pointed to a red tack in the north of Russia, not far from the Pechora River. "You know this site. We've had the U-12 boys over for a looksee from time to time. What the C.I.A. boys tell us now is that the surface complex, while fully operational, was built primarily as a cover for the real stuff underneath. Slide it back, it bares ten batteries of ten each automatic ICBM launchers, each capable of firing seventy-five multiple warhead missiles a minute, each multiple unit throwing off, in turn, twenty missiles of its own—"

"Savages," muttered Devereaux. He watched, jaws tense, as Hansen produced a folio of maps and pictures. He listened intently as Hansen explained. "You'll be parachuting from the new U-14-G. Believe you're up on it. Fiberglass fittings, immune to radar above seventy thousand, laser attachment that vaporizes it once you've cleared. Thought Xorba the ideal man to take with you, but didn't have your complete file, wasn't sure you knew him."

Devereaux nodded grimly. "Saved his life in the Aleutians. He'll go."

"Aleutians. Good. Means he won't choke up in the cold. Suppose you'll want some of his boys for a diversionary."

"Right up here," Devereaux said, pointing. "Their biggest nuclear reactor. Shouldn't be too tough to blow."

"Good enough. Where is that fellow with your phony papers? Excuse me a sec." Hansen went out the door.

Getting in there shouldn't be too much trouble, Devereaux thought, his mind racing. Getting out was something else. Up here in the Pechorskoye More seemed the best bet. Radio for pickup by a Polaris sub. Wished Cindye could be with him. Celebrate with a week in Xorba's village, a demijohn of rum, roast lamb and smoked oysters and Mama Kokoryphos running to meet them while the *bouzouki* music pounded the—

He stared from the window at the man in the black overcoat on the bench. A secret agent if ever he saw one. Suddenly he remembered. The same man had sat beside him on the plane.

Oh, well, it probably didn't mean anything. Case of nerves—

Hansen checked off the

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documents as he accepted them. Forged papers, credit cards, letters. "Everything?"

"Almost," Devereaux said. "I'll need some dough."

Hansen hesitated. Curious expression on his face. "Hey, Tom. Tom, Tom, old boy." He laughed and punched Devereaux on the shoulder. "Thought you were joking there. This is for the old Stars and Stripes."

"I know who it's for, but I'll have to have some walking around money. I spent every dime I had getting here."

"I don't get it. Money for what?"

"Look, Charlie, let me ask you something. Are you getting paid?"

"What's that got to do with it? I've made a long term commitment. I'm on the budget. Federal employee. You know you always get taken care of once the paperwork's finished."

"Then you better put me on the budget. They were eight months kicking it around the last time out. I'm not taking off from here with thirty-seven cents in my pocket."

"But you're not on the budget and can't be put on. You know we've no authorization until they pass on that appropriation from the contingency fund, and that allowable only by the Budget Director of Unclassified Intelligence and *that* requiring special authorization by the Chief."

"Well, call the Chief."

"*Are you serious?* You mean get him off the hot-line and his SAC conference to tell him you showed up here with thirty-seven cents and won't—?"

"Then loan me five hundred yourself."

"Loan you hell. You still owe me three hundred from—"

"And you know why. Six months in Albania waiting for you people to make up your minds about—"

"Take it easy, Tom. Calm down. I just had an idea." He shook his head. "No. Petty cash, I was thinking, but it's all IOU's."

Hansen paced the floor. He stopped suddenly . . .

"And he didn't go, and the Russians bombed us," presumed Claxton, watching Hurdis set his ball on the tee.

"Not yet," Seal said, "but keep alert. That encounter only took place yesterday."

Reflexively Pentel looked skyward.

Gleefully Hurdis swung. The ball soared and machine-gunned through tree branches and dropped into the water hole. They were ducking before Hurdis began to fling his clubs.

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We are happy to welcome Horace Gold to the pages of EQMM. Mr. Gold tells us that he was born the year World War I started, that he sold his first story when Ethiopia was invaded, that he married the day World War II began, that his son was born twenty days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, that he founded "Galaxy Magazine" the year of the Korean War, that he was divorced simultaneously with the flight of Sputnik, that he remarried to the reverberations of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, that he is without doubt "the historical man"... The significance of these coincident or near-coincident events? Well, Mr. Gold wishes us to advise the UN and the world that he has some other projects in mind. Would the UN and the world care to take steps—for example, to buy Mr. Gold off—and thus avert future calamities? . . .

And talking of calamities: here is the fascinating story of a little guy with an awful power. When he says any person's name three times, that person dies. Any *person,* any *name . . . Resist that calamitous premise if you can!*

THE DEADLY MAN

by HORACE GOLD

Usually, people get committed to the psycho ward by their families or courts, but this guy came alone and said he wanted to be put away because he was deadly dangerous. Miss Nelson, the dragon at the reception desk, put in a call for Dr. Schatz and he took me along just in case. I'm a psycho-ward orderly, which means I'm big and know gentle judo to put these poor characters into pretzel shapes that don't hurt them, but keep them from hurting themselves or somebody else.

He was sitting there, hunched together as if he was afraid that he'd make a move that might kill anyone nearby, and about as dangerous-looking as a wilted carnation. Not much bigger than one, either. Maybe

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five-four, 125 pounds, slender shoulders, slender hands, little feet, the kind of delicate face no guy would ever pick for himself, but a complexion you'd switch with if you've got a beard of Brillo like mine that needs shaving every day.

"Do you have this gentleman's history, Miss Nelson?" asked Dr. Schatz, before talking to the patient.

Her prim lips got even tighter. "I'm afraid not, Doctor. He . . . says it would be like committing suicide to give it to me."

The little fellow nodded miserably.

"But we must have at least your name—" Dr. Schatz began.

He skittered clear over to the end of the bench and huddled there, shaking. "But that's exactly what I can't give you! Not only mine—*anybody's!*"

One thing you've got to say for these psychiatrists: they may feel surprised, but they never show it. Tell them you can't eat soup with anything except an egg-beater and they'll even manage to look as if they do that, too. I guess it's something you learn. I'm getting pretty good at it myself, but not when I come up against something as new as this twitch's line. I couldn't keep my eyebrows down.

Dr. Schatz, though, nodded and gave him a little smile and suggested going up to the mental hygiene office, where there wouldn't be so many people around. The little guy got up and came right along. They went into Schatz's office and I went to the room adjoining, with just a thin door I could hear through and open in a hurry if anything happened. You'd be surprised how seldom anything does happen, but it doesn't pay to take chances.

"Now, suppose you tell me what's bothering you," I heard Dr. Schatz say quietly. "Or isn't that possible, either?"

"Oh, I can tell you *that*," the little guy said. "I just can't tell you my—my name. Or yours, if I knew it. Or anyone else's."

"Why?"

The little guy was silent for a minute. I could hear him breathing hard and I knew he was pushing the words up to his mouth, trying to make them come out.

"When I say somebody's name three times," he whispered, "the person dies."

"I see." You can't throw Dr. Schatz that easy. "Only persons?"

"Well . . ." The little guy hitched his chair closer; I heard it grate on the cement floor. "Look, I'm here because it's

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driving me nuts, Doc. You think I am already, so I've got to convince you I'm not. I have to give you proof."

The doctor waited. They always do at times like that; it kind of forces the patients to say things they maybe don't want to.

"The first one was Willard Greenwood," said the little guy in a slow tense voice. "You remember him—the Undersecretary down in Washington. A healthy man, right? Good career ahead of him. I see his name in the papers. Willard Greenwood. It has a . . . a *round* sound to it. I find myself saying it. I say it three times. Right out loud while I'm looking at his picture. So what happens?"

"Greenwood committed suicide last week," Dr. Schatz said. "He'd evidently had psychological difficulty for some time."

"Yes. I didn't think much about it. A coincidence, like. But then I see a newsreel of this submarine launching a few days ago. *The Barnacle.* I say the name out loud three times, same as anybody else might. You've done that yourself sometimes, haven't you? Haven't you?"

"Of course. Names occasionally have a fascination."

"Sure. So *The Barnacle* runs into something and sinks. I began to suspect what was going on; so, like an experiment you might say, I picked another name out of the papers. I figured it ought to be somebody who isn't psycho, like Greenwood turned out to be, or old and sick, or a submarine which might be expected to run into danger. It had to be somebody young and healthy. I picked the name out of the school news. A girl named Clara Newland. Graduating from Emanuel High. Seventeen."

"She died?"

The little guy gave a kind of sob. "Automobile crash. She was the only one who was killed. The others all only got hurt. Last Sunday."

"Those could be coincidences, you know," Dr. Schatz said very gently. "Perhaps you said other names aloud and nothing happened but you remember those because something did."

The guy kicked his chair back; I could hear it slide. He probably got up and leaned over the desk; they do that when they're all excited. I put my hand on the knob and got ready.

"As soon as I knew what was going on," he said, "I stopped saying names three times. I didn't dare say them even *once*, because that might make me say them again and then

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again—and you know what the payoff would be. But then last night . . ."

"Yes?" Dr. Schatz said, prompting him.

"A bar got held up. It was when the customers had left and the bartender was getting ready to lock the place. Two men. There was a scuffle and the bartender was killed. The cops came. One of the crooks was shot; the other got away. The crook who was shot was—"

I opened the door a slit and looked in. He was showing a clipping to Schatz, with his finger pointing shakily at one place.

"Paul Michaels," said the doctor.

"Don't say it!" the little guy yelled. I was ready to race in, but Dr. Schatz made a warning motion that the guy wouldn't notice that told me I wasn't needed. "I don't want to say it! If I do, it'll be three times and he'll die!"

"I think I understand," Schatz said. "You're afraid to mention names three times because of the result, and—well, what do you want us to do?"

"Keep me here. Stop me from saying names three times. Save God knows how many people from me. Because I'm deadly!"

Schatz said we'd do our best, and he got the guy committed for observation. It wasn't easy, because he still wouldn't give his name, and Dr. Merriman, the head of the psychiatric department, almost had another heart attack fighting about it.

We got together, Dr. Schatz and I, after the little guy had his pajamas and stuff issued and a bed assigned to him.

"That's a hell of a thing to carry around," I said, "thinking people die when you say their names three times. It would drive anybody batty."

"A vestige of childhood," he told me, and explained how kids unconsciously believe their wishes can do anything. I could remember some of that from my own childhood—my old man was a holy terror with the strap and many's the time I wished he was dead—and then got scared that maybe he would die and it would all be my fault. But I outgrew it, which Schatz said most people do. Only there are some who don't, like our little nameless friend, and they often get themselves twisted up like this.

"But that Paul Michaels," I said. "The crook who got shot. He's in the critical ward right here in this hospital."

"It's a city hospital," he answered, looking tired. "Everything the private hospitals won't touch, we get. That's why we have this patient, too."

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"Any special instructions?" I asked.

"I don't think so. This kind of case is seldom either suicidal or homicidal, unless the guilt feelings get out of hand. Keep him calm, that's all. Sedation if he needs it."

I had plenty to do around the mental hygiene ward without the little guy to worry about, but he wasn't much trouble. Until about an hour or two after supper, that is. I had some beds to move around and a tough customer to get into the hydrotherapy room, so I didn't pay much attention to the little guy and his restless eyes.

He came up to *me*, twitchy as hell, and grabbed my arm.

"I keep thinking about that—that name," he babbled. "I keep wanting to say it. *Do* something! Don't let me say it!"

"Who?" I asked, blank for a minute, and then I remembered. "You mean this crook Paul Michaels—"

He got white and jumped up and tried to stop my mouth, but I'd already said it. I tried to calm him down and finally had the nurse give him some phenobarb, all the time explaining that the name had slipped out and I was sorry. You know, soothing him.

He said, trembling, "Now I know I'm going to say it. I just know I will." And he shuffled over to the window and sat there holding his head and looking sick.

I got to bed about midnight, still wondering about the poor little guy who thought he could kill people that easy. I had the next morning off, but I didn't take it. There were cops all over the place and Dr. Schatz looked real worried.

"I don't know how our new patient is going to take this," he said, shaking his head. "That Paul Michaels we had here—"

"*Had?*" I repeated. "What do you mean, had? He transferred to a prison hospital or something?"

"He's dead," Schatz said.

I closed my mouth after a few seconds. "Aw, nuts," I grumbled, disgusted with myself. "I was almost believing the little guy did it. Michaels was shot up bad. Hell, he was on the critical list."

"That's right. There'd be nothing remarkable if he died . . . from the bullet wound. But his throat was slit."

"And the little guy?"

"We have him full of Nembutal. He was shouting that he had said Michaels' name three times and that Michaels would have to die and he would be responsible."

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"You haven't told him yet," I said.

"Naturally not. It would really put him into a spin."

It was a solid mess from top floor to basement, so I had to give up my morning off. The patients, except the little guy who was in isolation, all found out about Michaels somehow—you can't stop things like that from spreading—and I had a time handling them. In between, though, I learned how the case was developing.

There was this old cop Slattery we generally have for cases like Michaels sitting outside the critical ward, watching who went in and out. There had been somebody with Michaels on the stickup, see, who made it while Michaels was plugged, and the cops don't take chances that maybe the accomplice or someone from the underworld might want to get at the patient when he's helpless. They always put a guard on.

Well, Slattery is all right, but he maybe isn't so alert any more, and somebody slipped past him late at night, cut Michaels' neck with probably a razor blade, and then got out again without Slattery noticing. The other patients were all doped up or asleep, so they were no help. Slattery, though, swore nobody except nurses on duty in the ward or on the floor went past him. He claimed he didn't fall asleep once during the night, and the funny thing is, the nurses said the same. Or maybe it's not so funny; they like the old man and might do a little lying to help him off a rough spot.

Well, that put the girls on an even worse spot. If they were telling the truth, that Slattery had been awake the whole night, then one of them must have done it. Because Slattery had said that only the nurses went in and out of the ward. Captain Warren, the Homicide man, jumped on that fast and got the girls to line up in front of Slattery.

"Well, Slattery?" Warren said. "One of these nurses must have been the killer. Do you recognize one who went in there with no business to? Or did one of them act suspicious, and which was it?"

Slattery looked unhappy as he went down the line and stared at the girls' faces. He shook his head figuring, I guess, that he was in for some real trouble now.

"It was pretty dim in the ward," he mumbled. "All they keep on is a little night light—just enough so the girls can find their way around without tripping, but not bright enough to keep the patients

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awake. I can't even be sure which nurses went in and out."

"Nothing suspicious?" Warren demanded.

"Search me. They were nurses and my job is to keep anybody else out. As long as they were nurses and it was so dim there, one of them could have had an Army rifle under her uniform and I wouldn't know."

Captain Warren questioned the girls, got nowhere, and had them all checked to see if one didn't know Michaels well enough to want to knock him off.

I got all that from Sally Norton, one of the homely babes in the mental hygiene ward, when she came back from the grilling to go on duty. She went to her locker to change and then ran back, yipping, and grabbed Dr. Schatz. She had her uniform held up in front of her, like a shield, kind of, and she was shaking it angrily.

"Just take a look at this, Doctor!" she said. "Came back clean from the laundry yesterday and I haven't even worn it yet, and look at it now!"

"If there's anything wrong with the laundry, take it up with them," he said, annoyed. 'I'm having enough trouble keeping my patients quiet with all this racket going on over Michaels."

"But that's just it. I wouldn't be surprised if it has something to do with Michaels." And she showed him the sleeve, where there were red spots down near the wrist.

Schatz called in Captain Warren and Dr. Merriman, the head of the mental hygiene department. Merriman looked sicker than usual; he kept his hand inside his jacket, over his heart. All this excitement wasn't doing him any more good than it was doing the patients.

Warren was interested, all right. Being there in the hospital, it was easy to run a test and prove the spots were blood, human, Type B—which happened to be Michaels' blood type. He wasn't the only one in the hospital with that type, of course, but it isn't so common that Captain Warren could disregard it.

Warren started to give Sally a bad time, but Dr. Merriman cut in and told him about the little guy and the story about saying names three times.

"What in hell kind of nonsense is this?" Warren asked. "I'm looking for evidence, not a screwball fairy tale some nut thought up."

"Exactly," Dr. Schatz said fast; he'd been trying to head off Dr. Merriman, but hadn't

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dared to interrupt. "It's a fairly typical delusion with no more basis in fact than witches or goblins. I can't sanction questioning a disturbed patient because of it."

"You don't have to bother," said Warren. "I've got more important things—"

"The point," Dr. Merriman went on, "is that this man claimed he was afraid to mention—specifically, mind you—the name of Paul Michaels. That was why he wanted to be committed, in fact."

Warren looked baffled. "You mean you think he said Michaels' name three times and Michaels died because of that?"

"Certainly not," Merriman said stiffly. "It's a remarkable coincidence that deserves investigation, that's all. Or perhaps my idea of police work differs from yours."

I don't know how Schatz managed it, but he let Captain Warren know that Dr. Merriman was getting on in years and ought to be humored. So I went along with them to the little guy's bed, where he was just coming out of sedation. He was still groggy, but he saw us coming and ducked his left hand under the blanket.

Well, that's all you have to do to get a cop suspicious—make a sudden move like running out of a bank at high noon or ducking one hand under a blanket. Warren hauled it out, with the little guy resisting and trying to hide his pinkie in his palm. The cop straightened out the pinkie. It was colored red under the fingernail.

"Blood?" I asked, confused, and then got busy because the little guy was trying to pull away while Captain Warren took some scrapings.

It wasn't blood. It was lipstick, according to the lab test.

"There," said Dr. Schatz, satisfied, "you see? You've upset my patient, and for what?"

"Plenty," Warren said between his teeth, "and I'm going to upset him some more."

He had me hold the little guy down—I didn't want to until Dr. Merriman overrode Schatz's objections and ordered me to—while two cops put the little guy into Sally Norton's stained uniform and painted his mouth with lipstick.

You know, with that slender build of his and the cap on, he didn't look bad. Better than Sally, but then who doesn't?

"All right," Schatz said, "he could have gotten past Slattery in that dim light. Admitted. But what makes you think he did? And why should he have done so?"

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"The lipstick on the pinkie," said Warren. "If you want to do a decent job you don't just slap it on—you shape it with your little finger. Why? That depends. If the guy's psycho, he could have done Michaels in just because. But suppose he's the guy who was with Michaels on the job—Michaels was the only one who could have identified him. But Michaels was in a coma. So this character had to get into the hospital somehow and slit Michaels' throat to keep him from talking. Either way, it figures."

Dr. Merriman nodded. "That was my own opinion, Captain."

"You're lying! You're lying!" the little guy screamed. "I said his name three times and he died! They always die! It's the curse I have to bear!"

"We'll see," said Dr. Merriman. "Say *my* name three times."

The little guy cowered away. "I—I can't. I have enough deaths on my conscience now."

"You heard me!" Dr. Merriman shouted, turning a dangerous red in the face. "Say my name three times!"

The little guy looked appealingly at Dr. Schatz, who said soothingly, "Go ahead. I know you're convinced it works, but it's completely contrary to logic. Wishes *can't* kill. This may prove it to you."

The little guy said Dr. Merriman's name three times, pale and shaking and looking about ready to throw up with fear.

Warren put Slattery—*and* another guard—on the psycho ward, and started a check on the little guy's fingerprints.

When I got to work the next day, the ward was a tomb. It might as well have been. Sally Norton was crying and Dr. Schatz was all pinch-faced and the little guy was running around the room yelling that he shouldn't have been forced to do it.

"Do what?" I wanted to know.

"Dr. Merriman died last night," Schatz said.

I looked at the little guy in horror. "Him?"

"No, no, of course not," said Schatz, but it was in a flat voice, not the impatient way he would have told me a day ago. "Dr. Merriman had a cardiac lesion. He could have gone at any time. There may even have been a deep unconscious wish to escape the pain and fear, and this patient's delusion could have given Dr. Merriman a psychological escape. It's the principle behind voodooism. The victim wills himself to death; the hexer merely supplies the suggestion."

It was pretty bad for a while,

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until Captain Warren showed up with a big grin on his face. It soured when he heard that Dr. Merriman had died, but he threw out the idea that the little guy had done it.

Matter of fact, he had the cops put the arm on him and said, "Arnold Rausch, I arrest you for complicity in the murder—" And so forth.

The little guy, whose name turned out to be what Warren said, had been unlucky enough to leave some fingerprints around. They had him, sure enough, except that he stuck to this whammy story and hired a good psychiatrist, who got him an insanity plea. So we have him back in the ward here. And if you think he's given up and started mentioning people's names even once, let alone three times, you're battier than he is. He screams whenever somebody mentions *any* name. It's a hell of a job remembering not to call the patients by name when he's around.

"Look, what do you think?" I asked Dr. Schatz. "Is the guy psychotic or did he cop a lucky plea?"

Dr. Schatz ran his hand across his mouth and talked through his fingers. "I think he's psychotic. There's never any proof of that, of course, but his behavior bears me out."

"And what about this story of his about saying names three times? All right, maybe he made up those items before he showed up here—after all, they were dead already and nobody could say he had or hadn't said their names three times before they died. And Michaels—the little guy helped him shuffle out with a razor across the throat. But what about Dr. Merriman?"

"I've already told you," Schatz said tiredly. "Cardiac lesion and hypothetical death wish triggered by suggestion."

I put the mop back in the bucket and began wringing it after a fast swab at the floor.

"That's a guess," I answered. "What if the little guy is right and people *do* die when he says their names three times?"

"Why don't you try it and see?" he asked.

I almost upset the pail. "Me? You're the psychiatrist. Why don't you?"

"Because I know it's purely a childish delusion. I don't need any proof."

"That," I said, leaning on the mop, "is not a scientific attitude, Doctor."

"The devil with it," he grunted in annoyance. "If it's bothering you that much, I'll do it."

But he always seems to have something else to do whenever I remind him.

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a *NEW* parody by

JON L. BREEN

introducing Sir Gideon Merrimac (Old Giddy)
in a loving tribute to John Dickson Carr

Well, Jon L. Breen has done it again! After parody-pastiches of S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance, Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, "Frank Merriswell," Ellery Queen's "L. Larry Cune," John D. MacDonald's "Trygve McKee" (Travis McGee), and Earl Derr Biggers' Charlie Chan, Mr. Breen offers John Dickson Carr-Carter Dickson's Sir Gideon Merrimac, a chuckling blend of Dr. Gideon Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale. And what kind of crime is Old Giddy called upon to investigate? Naturally. A truly impossible one—of an invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-who-can-walk-through-walls-and-leaves-no-footprints. Who could ask for anything more?

(Don't miss the second, third, and fourth paragraphs on page 69 — this is splendid spoofing!)

THE HOUSE OF THE SHRILL WHISPERS

by JON L. BREEN

Millard Carstairs reflected in his first-class carriage seat in the New Orleans-Manchester local that he was not nearly the stuffy, stodgy puritanical Victorian that his jocular friends so insistently accused him of being. For example, take that young girl seated across from him. He was glad her skirt was short and that he enjoyed an unobstructed view of her well-moulded limbs. It didn't embarrass him a bit. Thus, he convinced himself, he was a man of the nineteen-seventies.

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True, he was approaching middle age, and a conservative lower upper-class upbringing had convinced him that there were certain proprieties to be observed, even cherished; and true, these proprieties had guided him well through his youth. But he was not a stuffy, stodgy stick-in-the-mud. As if to prove it, he endeavoured to engage the young lady in conversation.

Nancy Williston proved to be her name. "Williston. Williston!" he exclaimed. "I knew the name was familiar. I think the chances are more than fair, dear lady, that we may be getting off at the same stop, though that stop is clouded in obscurity and remoteness."

The fair-haired beauty raised demure eyebrows in surprise. "And what is your destination, sir?"

"Warwick-on-Stems, the Clifton Place—or the House of the Shrill Whispers, as it's called."

She shuddered. "I hate that name. It frightens me. But you're right. How on earth did you know?"

"I have suddenly remembered that there was a Nancy Williston, Margrove Clifton's ward, that my old friend Billy Clifton, who has summoned me to the House of the Shrill Whispers, grew up with as a sister. He described her to me many times, her fair hair and pert nose and beautiful, delicate features. You seem to fit that description perfectly, and since your name is Nancy Williston, I could only conclude that you are the same young lady. And if I may, I must say I'm delighted that so comely a travelling companion is going to the same destination I am."

"You are perceptive, sir. And your presence does much to relieve me, too. You are so strong and handsome and trustworthy-looking. And I am afraid."

Millard looked at her sharply. She did look afraid. He could see it in her eyes, the same type of fear he had recognized in the voice of his old friend Billy Clifton when the telephoned summons had come. "Why should you be afraid, Miss Williston? I realize that the House of the Shrill Whispers is said to be haunted, and that the ghost of old Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby has been seen to walk there on July 12 of the last year of every decade since 1880, and that today is July 11, 1970, but surely that old superstitious nonsense has no effect upon you."

"It is not only that," she replied tremulously. "There have been other mysterious goings-on at Uncle Margrove's

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house—threats on his life. Shortly after signing his latest will, leaving everything to Billy and me to share equally and cutting off his other three children, who are all currently visiting him, Uncle Margrove barricaded himself in the guest cottage, ordered it surrounded by artificial snow, had four spotlights placed on the walls to illuminate the premises from sunset to sunrise, engaged eighteen private security men from Pinkertons' to watch the guest house constantly, and made sure that all the doors and windows were locked and bolted from the inside. Only Answorth is allowed to visit him there."

"Answorth!" Millard exclaimed. "Is that old fellow still there? That old retainer must be a hundred."

"He's only eighty-seven," Nancy corrected, "and he's the only man Uncle Margrove can trust. Answorth brings Uncle Margrove his food and his mail twice a day."

"And yet your uncle is still afraid?" Millard prompted.

"Yes," Nancy Williston returned. "In his letter he talked of an invisible lighter-than-air killer who can walk through walls and leaves no footprints."

"Really!" Millard ejaculated. "That's the same thing Billy mentioned to me. I didn't see how he could be serious. But that could have been what had made him so worried, couldn't it?"

"Yes, it could be worrying. How ironic that Billy and I, named in the will, should be worried, when the other three children, not named in the will, should—should—"

"Yes? Should what?"

"I mustn't say."

"Yes, you must! I'm Billy's best friend. I want to help."

"Very well, then. Should be the object of *our* worry. I'm sure that either Cavendish or Jessica or Franklin wants to murder Uncle. Billy thinks so, too. It's almost as if there was another will by which one of them would inherit. But I know that Uncle wants Billy and me to be his heirs."

"Hmm," Millard pondered. "I wish Old Giddy were about."

"Who?"

"An old friend of mine. Sir Gideon Merrimac, the world's greatest detective. Billy asked me to try and make contact with him, but I was unable to. If only he were here."

A booming voice could be heard from the passage between the cars. "Harrumph! Oh, by Gumbo, harrumph! Deuced bother!"

"I think someone is stuck in the passage between the cars,"

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Nancy Williston suggested.

"Yes," Millard returned, bounding to his feet with determination. He thought he recognized that "Harrumph." He assaulted the passage, and after much pulling and pushing and grunting, the imprisoned colossus was extricated, realizing Millard's hopes. For the scarcely ruffled harrumpher, released from his prison and wheezing like a beached whale, could only be one man.

Who else was that fat and ruddy-cheeked? Who else wore two monocles, one in each eye, over a bulbous Fieldsian nose, a full set of gold teeth, and a pristine-white Colonel Sanders goatee? Who else wore a black opera cape in the heat of July, over purple-and-gold-checked tree-sized trousers, from one of whose pockets protruded a flowered handkerchief into which its proprietor periodically wheezed with earth-shattering volume, sometimes causing his cape to flutter and reveal a holstered antique duelling pistol hanging precariously onto his prodigious belly?

Yes, it could not be doubted. It was the man the situation called for—Sir Gideon Merrimac, known far and wide as Old Giddy.

Millard made hurried introductions and invited Old Giddy to sit down with them. When this demanding engineering feat had been adequately accomplished, Millard hopefully asked Old Giddy his destination.

"A haunted house! A ghost house! One called the House of the Shrill Whispers!"

Millard and Nancy gasped in unison. "Then you know about Sir Margrove and the invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-who-can-walk-through-walls-and-leaves-no-footprints?"

Old Giddy's beady eyes lit up behind both monocles. "Of these matters I am sadly ignorant. I was hoping the good solid ghost of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby might make his scheduled once-every-ten-years appearance, a matter I have been sent to cover by my publisher, who is dismayed by my failure to lay many ghosts lately. But this phantom killer you speak of is unknown to me. I haven't seen old Stinky Clifton since our public-school days, but I don't remember him as a man pursued by invisible killers. Have they caught him yet?"

"No, thank God!" Nancy gasped. "You call Uncle Margrove Old Stinky?"

"Don't they call him that any more?" Old Giddy queried in surprise. "I'm still called Old Giddy. Has Old Stinky gone high-hat on me and grown up? They all seem to do that."

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"Have you had any good cases since I saw you last?" Millard enquired.

"Several cases, son, but nothing really up my alley, nothing Old Giddy could stick his grinnin' teeth into. I tracked down an escaped denizen of Marineland that was reported terrorizing little old ladies by peeking in their windows, charges that proved groundless, I might add. I also brought to grief some vandals who were toppling over equipment in a carpet factory. I found the bunco artists who had been cheating a member of a New York theatrical club. I discovered the miscreant who barricaded the doorway of a used-car dealer with a pile of unnecessary trimmings from 1950 automobiles. I ferreted out the man who stole an amazing new formula for baby food. And I finally figured out who locked Butterick Prattler, the lawyer fellow, in a closet on his wedding day."

"These sound like fascinating cases," Millard protested.

"Yes, but not really my kind of case, though some came close enough. A rumored seal, a rocked loom, a rooked Lamb, an impassable chrome, a miracle pablum, and a sealed groom. Close every one of them, but no cigar! But you, son, you talk of an invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-with-wings-who-can-walk-through-walls-and-leaves-no-footprints. Now you're talking my language!"

"We never said he had wings," Nancy interjected.

"Miss, I never eliminate a possibility."

"That's the secret of his success," Millard provided.

"You ain't just whistlin' Dixie, honeychile," Old Giddy verified.

"Old Giddy," Nancy probed, "are you English or Southern American?"

"Does it matter? After all, I'm just a character in a detective story and so are we all, so let's get down to the problem at hand without further palaver."

"Look," Millard objected, "you may be a character in a detective story, Old Giddy, but I'm real! Prick me and see if I don't bleed."

"A character in a detective story had jolly well better bleed, son, or it won't be much of a detective story. If we were characters in a novel instead of characters in a short story, I'd discourse with you at appropriate length about the foolishness and absurdity of characters in fiction pretendin' they're real. It leads to characterization and verisimilitude and other elements that stand in the way of a good

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story. But that is neither here nor there nor anywhere else."

Millard Carstairs fumed silently. Being accused of not being corporeal didn't bother him personally, but the implication that Nancy also lacked flesh and blood affronted him deeply. Still, Old Giddy was widely proclaimed, by others as well as himself, as a *bona-fide* genius, and if the delusion that he was a fictional character came as part of the package, so to speak, Millard was willing to put up with it—at least, until the problem of the invisible-lighter-than-air-killer-et-cetera had been solved.

The old servant Answorth, looking older than his 87 years, met the trio at the Warwick-on-Stems station with bad news. Or good news, depending on the point of view. Old Giddy appeared positively ecstatic about it.

"Sir Margrove Clifton," the retainer quavered, "has been murdered in the guest cottage. All the doors and windows were triple-locked and triple-bolted from the inside. The cottage was surrounded by artificial snow in which no footprints appear. All sides of the cottage were spotlighted and watched by Pinkerton men, especially hired for the purpose, and they saw no one approach the guest cottage. I must conclude that the ghost of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby has walked and killed. He was a rather pleasant and well-behaved ghost up to now, but his latest escapade has tried my patience severely."

"The ghost isn't supposed to walk until tomorrow night," Old Giddy wheezed, as he manoeuvered his 400-pound bulk into the horse-drawn carriage that would take the four of them along the winding road to the House of the Shrill Whispers. "He really is an anti-social ghost if he walks a night early. I'm thinking a human killer is our real quarry, Answorth."

"Aye, and the house is full of candidates, sir. Mr. Franklin, Miss Jessica, and Mr. Cavendish, as foul a lot of relations as so fine a man could ever have. But none of them for all their evil impulses has the ability to walk through walls or fly or become invisible."

"But they could grip a duelling pistol," reasoned Old Giddy. "A ghost could not. Ghosts can go through walls all day and all night, but they cannot pick up a gun and fire it."

"You've forgotten something, Answorth," Nancy revealed in a faint whisper.

"Have I, Miss?"

"Yes. Ever since the days of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby,

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who haunts the House of the Shrill Whispers because he is searching for the ghost of his lady-love who died there July 11, 1870, the inhabitants of the house have used a special calendar. The Admiral had a three-century supply made, so that the date of his love's death would be blotted from the Cogsby calendar forever."

"You're right, Miss!" the old retainer rasped. "She's right, Mr. Giddy. All our calendars have no July 11 and two July 12's. At the House of the Shrill Whispers it is now July 12!"

"You mean," Millard interrogated, "that the ghost has a choice of two nights to walk, in case the atmospheric conditions are not right the first night?"

"Joke if you will," the old servant bristled. "But the ghost, who has already walked once, may this year, having tasted blood, walk twice."

With that Answorth mounted the coach, took the reins in his gnarled hands, and began the journey to the House of the Shrill Whispers.

Millard and Old Giddy had an immediate look at the murder scene. Sure enough, the old man had been shot and the gun was gone. The spotlights were all in working order, and the triple-locks and triple-bolts were all untampered with and for all the world impregnable. The whole scene was impossibly baffling.

"Now you go see the family, young fellow," Old Giddy insisted. "Old Giddy wants to have a closer look at the murder scene."

"May I be of no help?"

"No, no, you just run along and comfort your young lady. Old Giddy'll save the day."

Reluctantly, Millard left the guest cottage and returned to the main house, making another set of tracks in the artificial snow. By now there were fifteen distinct sets of tracks going to the door of the guest cottage and returning, but at the time the crime was discovered there had been none—only those of the servant Answorth, who had discovered the body.

As he walked across the snow, Millard heard a curious sound emanating from the guest cottage. A hammering sound. Could Old Giddy be building something?

Entering the main house, Millard greeted Nancy. She noticed at once that his face was pale. "Have you seen the ghost?" she demanded.

"No," he rejoined. "Have you?"

"No, but you look white as a sheet. Is Old Giddy investigating?"

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"Yes," Millard confirmed, a far-away look in his eye. "But I think I'll do some investigating of my own and try to help Old Giddy out. Do you know the phone number of the Louisiana offices of the British Rail?"

The Pinkerton investigator rubbed his jaw ponderously. "No, Mr. Carstairs. No one entered or left the cottage but the servant. And every time he'd given the old man his food and mail, we'd smooth out the artificial snow so we'd be sure to notice if any more footprints appeared in it."

"Did the old retainer ever have anything unusual with him?" Millard probed.

"Oh, frog's legs, mock turtle soup, cucumber-and-onion ice cream, pickled octopus tentacles, rattlesnake pot-pie—"

"Besides the food, I mean," Millard interrupted.

"No, not that I can—oh, there was his pet elephant."

"Pet elephant!" Millard started.

"Yeah, the last time the old servant brought the food, he also had Sir Margrove Clifton's pet elephant with him on a leash. He said the animal was lonesome and wanted to visit his master."

"Was it a big elephant?"

"No, no. Just a baby. Maybe a five-hundred pounder."

"And did the elephant come out when Answorth did?"

"Now that you mention it, no. I should have noticed that. The elephant stayed in there with Mr. Clifton."

"And yet no elephant was found when you broke into the guest cottage?"

"No, that's right. Gee whiz, now we got a vanished elephant on our hands on top of everything else."

Millard did not seem disturbed. "Do you think I could have another look at the murder scene?"

"Sure, I guess so. Old Giddy's through in there."

Within moments, Millard found what he was looking for. Under a rug in the cottage was a trap door that had been recently nailed down. Working quickly, he managed to pry it open and dropped down into a tunnel below the cottage.

Turning on his flashlight, he followed the tunnel in the direction of the main house. Halfway there he found what he had expected: a discarded elephant suit. Leaving this important but unwieldy piece of evidence behind, he hurried on to whatever awaited him at the end of the tunnel. Speed was essential, for Millard knew he could easily be too late.

Not bothering to look for a

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secret panel or a concealed button, Millard crashed through the last barrier like a hero from a Dime Novel of his post-Victorian youth.

As he rather expected, he was in the servant's quarters. He had overturned a bookcase in Answorth's tiny room, and that elderly servant, gasping and shocked but fortunately still alive, was lying on the floor in a heap of volumes by such authors as Jacques Futrelle, Thomas W. Hanshew, Carolyn Wells, and Fergus Hume.

"Thank God he hasn't gotten to you yet, Answorth!" Millard enthused triumphantly. "You're bound to be the next victim. You know entirely too much!"

"I don't understand. About what?"

"Old Giddy had been here before we arrived with him tonight, had he not?"

Answorth was silent.

"I know he made you promise not to tell, to pretend you hadn't seen him before if he arrived a second time. But you must tell me to save your life. He was here, wasn't he?"

"Yes," the old retainer croaked.

"And he visited your master, Margrove Clifton, disguised as an elephant, didn't he?"

"Yes, sir. He didn't want Mr. Billy or Mr. Cavendish or Miss Jessica or Mr. Franklin to know he was here then, you see."

"And he never came out?"

"No, sir. He was going to stay there to protect Mr. Clifton from harm."

"The heck he was!" Millard remonstrated.

"Believe it or not, son, that was the original plan," said a new voice. A four-hundred-pound spectre had appeared in the doorway, an antique duelling pistol in his hand. "But I was kind of desperate, don't you see? Desperate for the kind of locked-room problem that made me famous. When I found that he had a trap door in the guest cottage, a bloomin' tunnel that led from there to the main house, I knew exactly what the critics—and I have my critics, son—would say: that gimmick is a cheat. Secret passages and tunnels go back to Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole and Monk Lewis, and in a modern detective story—and this is a modern detective story, son, whatever you may think—such outworn devices are against the rules.

"So I was infuriated at him for invitin' me here to the House of the Shrill Whispers, on false pretences as it were. So I took out my pistol and shot him dead, planning to escape through the tunnel here and later go back and nail down the

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trap door, meanwhile tryin' to come up with some other explanation for the murder in the triple-locked cottage."

"And thus blame an innocent person for the crime!" Millard charged.

"No, son, not really. I just wanted to safeguard my reputation. I don't even mind bein' the murderer really, but havin' the gimmick turn out to be a secret passage! That was out—positively out."

The eyes behind the two monocles looked genuinely sad. "Of course, I knew Answorth would have to die, because he knew I was there in the first place, in the elephant suit, and he knew about the tunnel. But I didn't count on havin' to kill you, too, son. It goes down hard, but hang it, it does go down. Before I shoot you, though, son, I think it only fair that you explain how you got on to me, how you figured it all out."

"Easy, Old Giddy. It was when you mentioned that the victim had been killed by a duelling pistol before Answorth even told us what the weapon was. Then, when I heard you hammering behind the locked door, I guessed that you were trying to cover up your tracks somehow. I called British Rail, and they told me all the times for the trains that stop at the Warwick-on-Stems station. There are only two a day, the one we arrived on and the earlier one that you arrived on in the first place.

"But a handcar was stolen from the Warwick-on-Stems station early to-day, and it was found off the track in the bushes near the place where you first appeared on our train. It must have been a very athletic performance on your part, Old Giddy, leaping onto a moving train, especially for a man who is so bulky as to get stuck between cars. But your reputation was at stake, Old Giddy, and so you were able to perform far beyond your normal physical attributes."

The murderer smiled benignly. "Say, old son, I did do a right fine job of it, didn't I? In fact, what I did was more impossible than any impossible crime I ever investigated, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Old Giddy, Nick Carter himself couldn't have done better."

Old Giddy twirled the duelling pistol and returned it to its holster. "Son, I ain't gonna kill you after all. No, I'm givin' myself up. There ain't a jail in Louisiana that can hold Sir Gideon Merrimac. I hope you and Miss Nancy are happy with your money."

"You're a good sport, Old

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Giddy. But it's her money, and I won't live off my wife."

"Did you say wife?" enquired a new voice. Nancy had appeared in the doorway. "It's premature, isn't it, Millard? The crime isn't solved yet, and the suspects are waiting downstairs for you to question them, Old Giddy."

"The crime has been solved, Miss," Old Giddy acknowledged dolefully.

"But the ghost of Admiral Wilburforce Cogsby hasn't walked yet."

"Ghost!" roared Old Giddy. "Ghost!" he bellowed with a laugh that reverberated through the House of the Shrill Whispers. "The way my luck's runnin', it'll be a real ghost!"

NEXT MONTH . . .

12 NEW stories — including

HUGH PENTECOST *(detective John Jericho)*

PATRICIA HIGHSMITH *(about a jinx house)*

H. R. F. KEATING *(crime story)*

CELIA FREMLIN *(something unusual)*

EDWARD D. HOCH *(Nick Velvet and Rand)*

and a "thriller" by

CORNELL WOOLRICH *("unknown" novelet)*

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a COLONEL MARCH story by

JOHN DICKSON CARR

As you know from previous instances, whenever we publish a parody or pastiche we try to couple it with the real McCoy—a story by the author being burlesqued or imitated. To go with Jon L. Breen's "The House of the Shrill Whispers" we should give you a John Dickson Carr-Carter Dickson story about Dr. Gideon Fell or Sir Henry Merrivale. But, alas, neither great sleuth is available in print at this time. So, instead, we give you not the next best thing but the equal—for Carter Dickson-John Dickson Carr created more than two detectives in the grand tradition. Here, then, is an exploit of the 17-stone, bland-faced Colonel March, head of D-3, the Department of Queer Complaints, whose keen blue eyes sometimes need but a single glance to penetrate a seemingly impossible crime . . .

DEATH IN THE DRESSING ROOM

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

The lights were dimming when Jim Matthews entered the Orient Club. The hot smoky room swallowed him up as though he were padded into layers of cotton wool. Following the headwaiter, he groped among the tables in a darkness faintly lightened by the white of table covers, of shirt fronts, of women's shoulders.

Then the drums began.

They drowned the stir and mutter which never deserts a night club, as though the echo of all the voices in the world were imprisoned there. The drums began with a kind of tom-tom beat, growing deeper and more rapid. A blue spotlight appeared from the other side of the room. It touched the polished dance floor, it touched the edge of the orchestra from which the drums were now thundering. It allowed Jim Matthews to see that the headwaiter was bowing him

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to a table. True enough, the table was in a very good position on the edge of the dance floor. But it was occupied.

A girl in a white fur wrap looked round, startled, as they appeared. She was sitting alone at a table for two. The blue spotlight allowed Jim to make out only that she had brown hair and wide-spaced eyes and that by her clothes she was clearly not one of the girls of the house. On the table stood an unopened bottle of champagne, with a placard reading *Reserved.*

Not a word was audible under the noise of the drums. To the girl Jim Matthews tried to convey apology; to the headwaiter he indicated the "reserved" placard. That dignitary lifted his shoulders in a broad and hideous shrug, and in pantomime indicated that all the other tables were full. Jim, though he hated making himself conspicuous, argued back in pantomime. The headwaiter leaned close.

"Miss Rapport—she *dance,*" he hissed.

He stabbed his finger urgently toward a curtained doorway, through which the star of the show was due to appear. He almost pushed Jim down into the chair, and then he disappeared.

What exasperated Jim Matthews was that the headwaiter had paid absolutely no attention to what the girl at the table might think about it. He had not even looked at her. The matter wasn't of any importance, maybe; but Jim was already beginning to dislike the manners of the Orient Club.

He glanced across at the girl in the white fur wrap. "Sorry," he shouted.

He thought she smiled and shook her head. Then they both looked back at the floor again, for Francine Rapport was beginning her Javanese temple dance.

Jingling faintly, a figure in a high weird headdress moved into the blue spotlight. "Francine Rapport," though born in Holland and brought up in New York, was purely Oriental in her good looks. Her face was almost unrecognizable in a mask of paint, with lines drawn upward from the outer corners of the eyes and accentuating them, a stolid mask. She was small, her skin amber in color, the body well rounded, but of a muscled litheness. Her costume, of large metal ornaments, glimmered under a light coating of oil. Her hands moved up that costume, grew taut above her head, descended with the palms outspread, and the dance began.

Jim Matthews reminded him-

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self that he was not here to watch Francine Rapport. Yet he probably knew more about her than most of the patrons did. She must be in her forties, after a knockabout career with Tony Taplin; but she did not look it. Jim wondered where Taplin was tonight. He half got up from his chair—and saw Taplin, proprietor of the Orient Club, standing by the orchestra platform on the edge of the spotlight.

This was the moment when the girl in the white fur wrap slipped away from the table.

Well, it was no business of his. He watched her moving away into the darkness between the tables, in the direction of the orchestra platform. He sat down again. The tom-tom beat of the drums had quickened; the string music crept more insistently; and it came to Jim Matthews, as clearly as though he had heard an alarm bell, that something was going to happen.

Francine Rapport was afraid. He had no idea of what she was afraid, though anything was possible at the Orient Club. But it showed even in the rhythm of the dance, in the turn of her fingers or eyes, as though the fine body were really that of a priestess threatened by the temple god. So perhaps it was as well that she finished the dance a second too soon; and, a second too soon, the lights of the Orient Club flashed on.

They showed Jim Matthews that the girl in the white fur wrap was on her way back to his table. She had been moving quietly. But she started a little, caught by the lights only a few feet away. She was just opening her handbag to slip something inside. She slipped it inside, and the handbag closed with a click, but not before Jim had seen what it was. It was a man's leather pocket-wallet.

Under the roar of applause that went up for Francine Rapport, Jim looked into the other girl's eyes. She was stooping slightly forward, as though to hide both the wallet and her own handbag. Her face was flushed dull red. On the dance floor Francine Rapport was bowing to the applause; then Francine turned and ran for the curtained doorway to the dressing room. Chairs were pushed back. The orchestra, with a preliminary throat clearing from the saxophone, burst into a lively dance number. And the girl in the white fur wrap, imitating the movement or thrown into a panic by it, lost her head and ran. With a muttered exclamation Jim Matthews got to his feet and followed her. After all, it was what he was there for, wasn't it?

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Couples were taking the floor, looking unreal in the thick smoky haze. They poured out to such an extent that Jim was caught as though in a football rush. From a microphone issued Tony Taplin's rich, hollow voice. "The boys are playing for you—" Jim dodged through, keeping his eye on the white fur wrap. It disappeared through the curtained doorway to the dressing rooms. He reached the doorway only thirty seconds later; but the girl was gone.

Beyond was a passage in which he saw several doors, all closed. It was badly lighted, dingy, and full of the scent of stale powder. He met nobody. The whole house seemed to shake to a measured stamping over the music; but it might have come from another street. Then a door at the end of the passage opened; the girl in white came out and closed the door softly. She breathed as though she had been running; she adjusted her wrap before she turned round.

And Jim Matthews stepped in front of her. "Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?" She spoke coldly, with sudden calmness.

Tony Taplin, Jim thought, knew how to choose his employees. This girl was a limb of the Orient Club, probably as skillful in the crafts of blackmail as Francine herself; but she could have passed anywhere. Both her features and her voice had that fine-drawnness which is supposed to indicate breeding; her brown eyes and the arch of the eyebrows showed cold wonder as she looked back at him.

"Would you mind telling me," Jim continued, "what you were doing with that wallet you put in your handbag a minute ago?"

"Wallet? Really? What wallet?"

"Oh, stow it," said Jim. The way he spoke was caused by mingled anger and disappointment. "I'm a police officer, Miss."

This startled her, no less than the stolid tone he had deliberately adopted. He saw in her face incredulity, doubt, fear, and, growing underneath them, a certain amusement.

"Really? I see. You're one of those people who have a terribly good time and then arrest the management for selling drinks after hours."

"I have nothing to do with that." He tried not to speak hotly. "I only ask you, would you mind explaining what you were doing with that wallet?"

"So I suppose I shall have to tell you. I picked it up off the floor. Oh, yes, that's quite true.

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Not being able to appreciate the charms of Miss Francine Rapport, which evidently stagger you men so, I went out to the bar during her dance. On the way I picked up the wallet. Naturally, when the lights went on I wanted to find the proper owner."

"Then why didn't you?"

"What on earth do you think I'm doing here? Miss Rapport, I understand"—she spoke with a degree of quiet hatred—"is part owner here. I am sorry if the proper procedure is to stand up on a table and shout that you have found a wallet. *I* thought of taking it to Miss Rapport."

"And did you give it to her?"

For the first time the girl's eyes shifted. "No. She—she isn't here. Evidently she didn't come back here after her dance. Perhaps you'd be good enough to let me pass so that I could take the wallet to Mr. Taplin? Come with me, if you like. By all means."

Someone was humming dreamily. Along the passage strutted a good-looking blonde maidservant in cap and apron. Carrying a dressing gown over her arm, she gave them a pleasantly impudent look as she wormed past to open the door.

The girl in white made an attempt to get away. Jim saw the intention in her eyes; he closed his fingers round her wrist. Just at that moment the door was opened and after the fraction of a second the maid screamed.

"I didn't do it," the girl in white cried. "I swear I didn't do it!"

Even from the doorway they could see it. In an untidy dressing room of pseudo-Oriental garishness Francine Rapport sat at a dressing table before a mirror ringed with lights. She lay forward across the table, her elaborate headdress awry. Her back was bare except for the fastenings of a broad metal breastplate, which winked and glimmered under a film of oil. The bangles had slid down from her arms like coiled snakes. And she was not a pleasant sight, for she had been stabbed through the back with a pair of long and narrow-bladed scissors.

Still gripping the wrist of the girl in white, Jim went in. Murder! A murder case for the first time in his short police experience. He felt a slight physical queasiness.

The woman had died very recently; and, despite the clumsiness of the weapon, from a direct heart wound. There were no signs of disorder on the dressing table except that a sandalwood box was open and a fragment of paper was pressed

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in the dead woman's contorted fingers.

Faintly along the passage from the dance floor, hollow and soothing out of a microphone, drifted Tony Taplin's rich voice: "A selection of o-old, old favorites, beginning with the immortal 'Bye-bye, Blackbird,' Let her go-oh, boys."

Jim turned to the maid.

"Who are you?"

"Me? I'm Paula." In an extremity of terror she pressed her hands to the sides of her head and wagged it.

"Her maid?"

"Eh?"

"Miss Rapport's maid?"

"Yes, *sir.* Who wants to know?" She glared at him.

Jim told her. "Were you here when she came back from her dance a few minutes ago?"

"I wasn't! I wasn't, and I can prove I wasn't! She gave me a message to take to Mr. Taplin, to come and see her when she'd finished her dance, and that's what I went and told him. And—"

"Steady. Do you know which is table number sixteen out there? Right, then. At table sixteen you'll find a big heavy-set man; sandy mustache, short hair, speckled kind of face. His name is Colonel March. Ask him if he can come in here, but don't mention this to anyone else. Got that?"

When the maid was gone, Jim bent closer to the dressing table. It was easy to make out a few words written on the fragment of paper in Francine Rapport's hand: "*like this. Ever your adoring—Tommy.*" The smooth clean fingers, with their nails dyed purple, held to this as though they held someone even in death.

Jim Matthews did not touch anything. This was not the concern of Department D-3. He and Colonel March were at the Orient Club in search of a superpickpocket, and they had evidently found her; but someone has to take charge when a pickpocket tells lies within ten feet of a murdered woman. He led the girl in white to a chair.

"Let me have your name and address, please."

"I'm sorry. I can't tell you that."

Jim shut up his notebook. "That's your privilege," he said. "I also want you to understand that you're not bound to answer any questions I may ask you. But if you'd only realize—"

"I don't mind answering your questions," said the girl, and the tears started into her eyes. "It can't be much worse for me than it is, can it?"

"Then why didn't you tell me you knew she was dead?"

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"Do you think I'm insane? You'd only have thought exactly what you did think. But I didn't kill her. I came in here and found her dead and came out again. That's all I know. All I wanted to do was get away. I don't expect you to believe that. I probably wouldn't believe it myself if I were in your place; but it's the truth."

She sat back in the chair with an expression of cool despair.

"Then what about that wallet?"

"It's Tony Taplin's wallet. You might as well know that now."

"You stole it?"

"No. Don't worry. I'm not going to assume a pose of injured innocence, or jump up and fly into a tantrum—as she used to do." Her eyes moved toward Francine. "But I really didn't steal it. He dropped it. He dropped it, I tell you!"

"Have you still got the wallet? You'd better let me have it, then."

An expression of cynicism came into her face, a kind of pleasure as though in some ironical secret. If he had not seen her other expression when she was off guard, he could have believed her. Without a word she opened her handbag, took out the wallet, and handed it to him.

It was of plain black leather, without name or initials, but its contents were damning enough. This was no ordinary wallet: it contained, neatly folded, a thousand pounds in fifty-pound notes.

They were startled by an exclamation from the doorway. Tony Taplin was staring with a sickly look at the woman sprawled across the dressing table.

Even those who knew Taplin's crookedness or his innate viciousness were compelled to admit his charm. He went through the world with the manner and the voice of a perpetual radio announcer. Not bad air or drinks or late hours seemed to impair his alertness. His wiry dark hair, his pleasant light eyes and close-shaven jaw, made him look like an advertisement in a drugstore window. But all this was gone now.

He said, "Who are you?" And then, in a higher key: "My God, what is it?"

"Steady, sir. Don't touch anything."

Taplin had hurried to Francine. He touched her shoulder, and then he began to beat his fist into his palm in a kind of frenzy.

"She's dead," he said.

"Yes. We—"

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"They got her," said Taplin. "She was all I had. Who did it? Tell me who did it and I'll kill him! I mean that." He whirled round toward the girl in white. "Who's that? Who are you?"

All this time Jim Matthews felt that the girl was studying Taplin. He could not interpret her expression. But she appealed to Matthews.

"At least"—she spoke with quiet urgency—"you can clear up one thing. I mean, about that wallet. Mr. Taplin can clear it up—it's his wallet. I saw him drop it. And he can tell you who I am, too; he can vouch for me."

Jim held it out. "Is this your wallet, sir?"

"To hell with the wallet," snarled Taplin. Then he blinked, and his bewilderment grew. "What wallet? Where? What are you talking about?"

"Does this belong to you?"

"Certainly not."

"And I suppose you'll say, too," insisted the girl in a soft steady voice, "that you don't know me either?"

Taplin spoke with a sort of desperate courtesy. "Madam, I don't know what you're talking about. I do know that Francine's dead. I loved Francine. I come in here and find her like this, with a pair of scissors—" he stopped, his face working as though he were going to weep "—and all you people can do is babble about a wallet, wallet, wallet. No, I don't know who you are. I never saw you before in my life. Did you kill her?"

"Did *you?*" asked the girl.

The other had got a grip on himself. "I've done a lot of things in my life," he answered grimly. "To judge by the number of police in the place tonight, they think I've done a lot more. But there's one thing I didn't do. I didn't kill Francine. I never left that orchestra platform from the time she was dancing until one minute ago."

That was true. Jim admitted it to himself; and so, by the look on her face, did the girl.

"Fifty people will testify to that. For once in my life," muttered Taplin, a savage and surprised look coming into his eyes, "for once in my life I'm in the clear when dirty work's been done. And *this* kind of dirty work. This kind!"

"Quite so," agreed a new voice. "This kind."

It belonged to Colonel March. The seventeen stone of Colonel March filled the doorway. His thumbs were hooked in the pockets of his white waistcoat; he was as bland as ever, but his eye looked wicked.

"Hello, copper," observed Taplin—yet without offense.

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"Good evening," said Colonel March.

"Come to run us all in?"

"No," said Colonel March seriously. "I've telephoned the divisional station about this. They will take charge. I really came to break up your newest and, I think, most ingenious racket."

"I don't understand that," said Taplin sharply.

Colonel March studied him. Behind that huge facade there was a kind of admiration.

"My good Anthony," he said, "confound you for a genius! You don't use guns. You don't use knockout drops. You don't even need a chucker-out. Your weapon is psychology." His grin became broad and sinister. "Wherever the Orient Club opens up, as it does fairly frequently, you have some new and foolproof device for separating the gullible from their money. Paris and New York testify to that. Here you are more subtle—but you've got a real jewel. It took me several days with a wet towel round my head to decide what it was."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Pocket-picking in Futurist style. Pocket-picking in which the guest doesn't even know he's been robbed."

As though casually, Colonel March went over and stared down at the body of Francine Rapport. He did not seem concerned with it. He went on speaking without looking at Taplin or the girl.

"Not ordinary pocket-picking," he assured them.

"That's much too dangerous. All guests at night clubs have a drink; some have a tolerable number of drinks; still others—I think the fact is well known—have too many drinks. So there would be too much of a row if the pocket-picking were discovered even once. And a whole epidemic of it would put the Orient Club in very bad odor with its customers. But there is a better way.

"Now, a man with a good number of drinks inside him seldom remembers exactly how much money he has in his wallet. When he totals it up at the end of the evening, and finds three pounds or a fiver less than he expected, he simply assumes that he must have spent it himself. Just as we all do. Certainly he never thinks of his wallet being lifted—lifted and deftly returned, minus as much as the Orient Club thought he could spare without noticing it. The method is harmless and very nearly undetectable. But the takings at the end of the week must be enormous. Mr. Taplin, I congratulate you."

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There was a pause. Jim Matthews could not read Taplin's face.

"He's gone off his head," Taplin said critically. "I don't think you can prove what you're saying."

Colonel March turned round from the dressing table.

"I'm afraid not," he agreed. "Just when we were trying to prove it, this young lady butted in."

"So," said the girl in white, "you think I'm a pickpocket?"

"No," Colonel March said. "I think I know who you are now, though I don't blame Matthews for being taken in. Your name is probably Joan Forsythe. You live in Kensington, at an address I can't for the moment remember, and you have a brother named Thomas in the Diplomatic Service. I can also guess what you were doing with that wallet."

The girl sprang to her feet.

"You did not take it from anybody," Colonel March told her dryly. "On the contrary, you were trying to give it to somebody. To Mr. Taplin, in fact. Would you mind telling me, Matthews, exactly what happened here?"

His face was sardonic as Matthews explained. He took the wallet and held it up before the girl.

"Ah, yes. I see. This contains the blackmail money that Taplin and Rapport wanted from your brother for his affair with Miss Rapport. Gad, what a reminiscent note! You were instructed to hand the money to Taplin in public, in the presence of witnesses, in a wallet, and with the covering words: 'This is your wallet, isn't it?'

"You went to give it to him by the orchestra platform; but at the last minute you lost your nerve and tried to fling it at Miss Rapport instead. That's another of their games," Colonel March added sadly. "The one they tried in Paris."

All Taplin's bounce and energy had come back to him. His eyes were still a little hysterical, like those of an actor who has played an exhausting part. But he did not seem to take offense; he only shook his head skeptically.

"You're going too fast, my friend," he suggested. "You could get into trouble, you know, talking like that. *I* don't know what you're talking about. But then you're telling me, aren't you?"

"Is he?" said the girl through her teeth.

For a second or two she did not seem to know whether to feel relief, or anger, or an even worse despair. But it was a slipping of the glazed deter-

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mination, which showed a very human being underneath; human, and a little petulant.

"You've seen Tommy," she flared out at Colonel March.

"Not exactly, Miss Forsythe. He came to us last week, then lost his nerve and refused to set a trap. There was nothing else we could do about it."

"Well, what else could *I* do? I had to get back those letters Tommy wrote her. It wouldn't have mattered twopence, don't you see, if Tommy hadn't been in the Diplomatic Service? But he's got a wonderful opportunity; he'll be sent to Paris or Rome if nothing happens. He won't help himself, and I—well, I—"

"Look here," muttered Jim Matthews. "I seem to have made an ass of myself again. Sorry, sir."

"Why should you be sorry?" asked Joan Forsythe. "You may not have caught a pickpocket. But how do you know you haven't caught a murderess? Look there. Look in her hand. Look at that piece of paper, signed by her adoring Tommy. That's torn off one of my brother's letters; and our wonderful Mr. Taplin knows it as well as I do."

"I don't know what Francine had been up to," said Taplin. "About letters, that is. If she wanted to sell some letters, that was her business. But if there were letters, where are they now?"

Colonel March took the question with great seriousness. Again he bent over to peer at the letter, unfolding the fingers so that he could look at the smooth soft palm of the hand as well. The hand and arm seemed to interest him as much as the fragment of paper.

"Well, Miss Forsythe?" he asked over his shoulder. "Did you get the letters?"

"No, no, no! I've told you before—I told you," she appealed to Jim, "that she was dead when I got here. I was only here half a minute, anyway. I haven't got any letters; you can search me if you like. *He* had the letters. He probably still has them."

"I never had any letters," said Taplin.

Joan Forsythe pulled herself together. She studied Taplin in a curious way; and she spoke in a new, detached, wondering tone. "You know," she said, "you **really** are a nasty bit of work."

"That may be," agreed Taplin frankly. "We're none of us perfect, not even you. But you see, Miss So-and-So, you're in a jam. A bad jam. You ought to understand that, for your own good. And, honestly, you oughtn't to be so free with your

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accusations. Now, I'm not in a jam at all. I didn't kill that poor kid; I couldn't have killed her. The coppers themselves will tell you I never left that orchestra platform at any time."

The girl appealed to Colonel March. "Is that true?"

"It is quite true, Miss Forsythe."

"You see?" said Taplin.

"No, I don't see," answered Joan Forsythe, in the same puzzled voice. She made a gesture. "What I can't get over is a kind of cheap meanness about the whole thing. It doesn't seem big or terrible or even tragic. It only seems grimy and mean. My brother isn't any persecuted figure who's guilty of a lot of high crimes.

"But just because he can't afford scandal, and goes out and makes a fool of himself over that woman, they're all ready and waiting to make money out of it. They're so used to helping themselves at other people's expense that they don't even see anything very strange in it. They only say to you, in a surprised kind of way, 'Well, of course you'll have to pay now for what we know, so pay up and let's have no more nonsense.' "

She drew a deep breath.

"Maybe they're right. I don't know. All I know is that it cost Tommy and me nearly everything we've got to scrape that money together. There must be lots of poor fools like us. I don't know whether you believe what this man tells you; but you seem to. Whatever you mean to do to me, there'll be a dreadful scandal at the end of it; and poor Tommy in the middle. The clever ones of this world have it all their own way, haven't they?"

"I think not, Miss Forsythe," said Colonel March.

And they all looked at him.

The abrupt stillness in the Orient Club, a sort of clang of stillness, reached farther than this dressing room. The music of the orchestra, after wobbling, had stopped in the middle of a bar. The mutter of voices from the dance floor, after rising abruptly, had died away; and Jim Matthews knew why. The crowd had seen police uniforms at the front door.

But Colonel March, his arms folded, did not seem to notice. "You," he said sharply, turning his head toward the door. "Paula, I think your name is. The maid. Come in here, please."

Paula obeyed. She entered like a cat—not straight, but moving round the corner of the jamb. Though she did not seem nervous, there was defiance in her full-rounded eyes.

"Paula," Colonel March re-

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peated. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

The reply was fired back quickly. "Maybe happen you have. I was at the Tin Hat Club two, three years. And at the Odalisque for six months."

"I have never been at the Tin Hat Club. No; haven't I seen you more recently than that?"

Paula shrugged.

"Well, we'll omit that," said Colonel March in a curious voice. "How many dressing rooms are there here, can you tell me?"

"Two besides this, sir."

"Any other cabaret turns besides Miss Rapport's?"

"No."

"And the girls—I mean, the dance hostesses: did they change in these rooms?"

Taplin was about to intervene; but Paula, keeping her eyes full and hypnotic, got in before him. "No. Other side. Miss Rapport wouldn't let them."

"When did you last see Miss Rapport alive?"

Paula snatched at this. "I passed her when she came off the floor, that's what. She gave me a message for Mr. Taplin."

"So you have an alibi, too. Just one other thing," observed Colonel March, with sudden politeness. "We came here to look for a very good pickpocket. So we may as well be thorough. Let me have a look at your hands, will you?"

"My hands?"

"Both hands."

She hesitated, flashing a look at Taplin; but she stretched them out.

"If," said Taplin, "you're saying Paula had anything to do with killing Francine, you're wrong. Fifty witnesses can prove it. She was out on the dance floor the whole time. And if you're saying she's a pickpocket, you must be completely off your nut." Then he shouted, "What do you think you'll find on her hand, anyway? Beeswax?"

"No," said Colonel March. "Only oil. And you're quite right—she was out on the dance floor the whole time."

Paula jerked away her hand as though she had burned it. But Colonel March still had her gently by the other arm; and he did not let go.

"We've noticed several things about Francine Rapport," he went on. "She performed her Javanese dance in a blue spotlight, and with her face done into such a grotesque mask of paint that nobody could recognize it. But note the color of her skin; and compare it with Paula's. Note her height and build; and compare them with Paula's. Yes, Paula was on the dance floor, impersonating

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Francine in the temple dance, while Francine lay dead in this room. And, if you don't want to be accused of the murder yourself, young lady"—he swung a screaming Paula round to face him—"you had better admit that your friend Taplin stabbed Rapport with the scissors just before she was due to come out for her dance."

Tony Taplin tried to wrench her away from Colonel March and shake sense into her. But she was a bad accomplice. She had convicted both of them before the Divisional Detective-Inspector reached the room.

"The trick," Colonel March said to Joan Forsythe and Matthews afterward, "was simple enough; and very easy to perform without a hitch. Our ingenious Mr. Taplin, who thought he deserved all the good things of life, was fed up with Francine. She was a nuisance. She was a nagger. She was aging. She wanted too much money. So the partner had to be eliminated.

"It was easy to train Paula in the routine of the dance, as he had trained Francine. It was easy to manage the substitution: there were no other cabaret turns at the Orient Club, and nobody else came near those dressing rooms. Paula could be seen, of course, only in her makeup, the headdress hiding her hair, and in that dim disguising blue spotlight. She could not be seen close at hand. When Francine had just finished changing into costume a few minutes before the dance, Taplin stabbed her while Paula was getting into a duplicate costume in an adjoining, empty dressing room.

"Paula came out, locked the door of Francine's room so that no one should discover the body too soon, took the key with her, and went out to dance. Afterward she returned, unlocked the door, got into her ordinary clothes in the empty dressing room, and was ready to appear in a very few minutes. All this time, of course, Taplin was preparing an impregnable alibi. That was the purpose of the whole scheme; and it entailed an alibi for Paula as well. Taplin was ready to swear to her presence near him should anyone question her.

"They did not particularly care who found the body. But I am certain they never intended *you* to find it, Miss Forsythe. On the contrary, Taplin must have been rather sick when you did not approach and hand him his thousand pounds. Afterward, with the police there, he could hardly claim it when by an unfortunate mischance suspicion was plumped on you.

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"He never intended that scrap of paper to be found in the victim's fist. He asked for the letters from Francine, stabbed her as she was taking them out of that sandalwood box, and unfortunately tore them from her hand too quickly. So he had to attack you in order to protect himself."

Colonel March looked away musingly. "Since we found the letters on Taplin, they won't be any trouble to your brother in the future. But I give you my word you were never in any great danger. It was plain from the first that there had been a substitution of identities—"

"From the first?" demanded Joan Forsythe. "But how?"

"That's what I should like to know, sir," agreed Jim Matthews, with a certain gloom.

"They forgot the oil," said Colonel March. "You may have noticed the coating of oil put on all those large metal ornaments to give them the blurred, mysterious gleam in imitation of the real temple dance. The dance consisted of a series of evolutions with the dancer's hands and arms pressed flat against her body or brushing against it. We saw that. The palms of Francine's hands, and her arms, should have had a film of oil from brushing against the ornaments. They hadn't—we saw that, too. Still, it was clear before then. Francine Rapport had been doing that dance for a long time. She could not have forgotten the quality called tempo. She finished her dance too soon, with the orchestra going wild. I did not know who the dancer was. But I knew it could not be Francine Rapport."

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a secret-agent story by

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

A gripping story by the author of ROGUE MALE *and* A ROUGH SHOOT . . . *"Death was the least. Death was a companion just as present in his personal war as in any public one" . . . and "he dared not look back or run" . . .*

THE INSTINCT OF THE HUNTED

by GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

He strolled quietly away from the mailbox, knowing that the game was up. This was the end, and he was not prepared for it. He had always expected it to come—if it had to come—at home or in the course of some police check. But evidently they had not found out his name. They only knew about the mailbox and the timing. He would learn how they knew after his second or third interrogation, if he had any curiosity left. Now there was nothing for it but to keep walking until those two security agents came alongside and gripped his arms.

The trick had worked for nearly a year. He dropped his reports in the mailbox just before the time for collection. The envelope would then be at the top or conspicuous among the top four or five. Thus it was easy for the postman to pocket and pass on the letter. One had only to be sure that the right man was on duty. It had even been possible, in an emergency, to bypass the censorship of foreign mail.

Today he had not given himself away by any change of expression or sudden movement. He could count on that. After dropping the letter in the box he had continued on his way at an even pace. Behind his eyes remained a photograph of the scene. He had time to run it through memory and develop it as he walked.

On the opposite pavement, where usually only a handful of

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women could be seen scurrying home to prepare lunch, two men had been talking together. They were in no way remarkable. They might have been two door-to-door salesmen comparing notes. It was the greatest luck that he knew one of them by sight, the most abominable luck that he had not spotted him before the letter was mailed.

The photograph in his mind also showed two more men on his side of the street, looking in a shop window. They might be innocent passersby but, if they were not, they fell neatly into the composition. One pair would wait until the collection was made from the box; the others would make the arrest.

He did not look round. He tried to believe himself a plain respectable citizen so that neither his walk, his back, nor his hands could possibly suggest guilt. Now, what would experienced police agents do? Their case could not be quite complete. True, it would be unshakable as soon as that envelope at the top of the box was opened. But for the moment? Well, since their suspect appeared unworried and walking fairly purposefully, they would tail him; it might be profitable to find out where he was going and to whom he talked.

But they could take no risks. None at all. If he hailed a taxi or jumped on a bus, that would be the end. He could not be allowed to break contact. They would instantly obstruct any move which gave him the slightest chance of escaping.

So keep walking. A harmless human activity.

He knew very well what a lot of evidence could be extracted from it. Tail a man who was walking, tail him for an hour, and one could almost tell his fortune, let alone his character, his income, the state of his digestion and his fears.

His fears. God, it was difficult not to show any! Death was the least. Death was a companion just as present in his personal war as in any public one. What appalled him was the certainty that when at last he died he wouldn't be recognizable to himself in body or mind. Well, he had always accepted that. Why? The answer was something neutral for half his brain to think about while he kept walking. Patriotism? Democracy? Or hatred? Hatred of a system, a government that hung more oppressively over his country every day?

Hardest of all was not to look round. If he did they might arrest him at once. His only chance of delaying the end

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was to show himself clearly and absolutely unconscious that he was followed.

Having been a security man himself, he could imagine the messages going back to headquarters by walkie-talkie—or by telephone perhaps, if there were a third person who could leave the hunt to use it.

"We have got him," they would say, "but it's worth seeing where he is going . . . No, sir, no danger of losing him. He doesn't know. Couldn't know."

Better make quite certain that he was not merely returning to an office or on any daily routine such as shopping or visiting a café. He very slightly quickened his pace, settling down, so far as pavement and people allowed, to a steady five and a half kilometers an hour. He might be going home, but, if he was, why not take his usual bus? So long as they were kept guessing, so long as they could not jump to any conclusion, they would follow.

Direction had been decided for him on leaving the mailbox. He could not change it too abruptly. He had to appear intent on something. Well, his present course would do. It led straight to the inner suburbs on the east of the city. After twenty minutes he thought it wise to offer them a little diversion. A taxi was approaching. He hesitated as if about to stop it. When the driver began to pull in, he shook his head and walked on. That would give them something to think about if they were still behind him. Were they? He dared not find out. One single suggestion that he was suspicious and they would no longer take the risk of losing him.

He wondered if they could tell that he was armed. That was not an urgent matter yet, nor likely to be. Still, it was worth a thought. Certainly they would know, after such long detailed observation, if the gun had been in a shoulder holster or pocket. He doubted, however, if an automatic nestling across the navel could be spotted from behind. They might reasonably assume that a man who might be searched would not be such a fool as to carry one. They would be on their guard, of course, but not keeping the question continually in the forefront of consciousness. That might be important . . .

They had been following for six kilometers now, tiring and inclined to forego the contact to whom he might be leading them. Their keen sense of duty, their strong instinct against running him in at once, ought

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to be revived. He decided to display more caution, as if he were nearing his destination. It would be the first quick glance over his shoulder that they had seen, and therefore important.

He looked behind him. He could not spot any followers at all. Had the walk and the discipline been all for nothing? Careful! That could not be assumed yet. It was all very well to force himself to ignore terror, but don't overdo it! He reminded his body of what was going to happen to it.

He chose a long residential street. There were very few pedestrians. If the hunters were still determined to take no action and stick to the trail, they would have to be very careful. However casual they appeared, they were bound to be out of place and conspicuous. His experience had taught him how they—if they still followed—would arrange that one. It would show how relentless the pursuit really was. If they knew their job (and no one knew it better) there ought to be a car moving more or less on parallel lines. As soon as his two shadows were forced to fall too far behind, they would signal the car to take over.

He spotted the car. It drove past in the same direction and parked on the other side of the road. He could not really have said why he was certain it was the car. Perhaps because it did exactly what it should, covering the road he was in and two side streets into which he might turn. Perhaps because nobody opened the door in answer to the bell which the driver was ringing or pretending to ring. Perhaps it was the instinct of the hunted.

It was oddly comforting to get his fear back. Now he knew that he had not imagined they were after him. Also he had proof that so far he had decoyed them into believing his movements significant. That report collected from the mailbox must already have been read. His guilt was beyond question. Yet they still thought it worthwhile to see where he was going before they struck.

He continued eastward. He was now passing through a local shopping center, and the two could safely close up. He longed to confirm that they were still on his trail, but every trick he knew for seeing who was behind him was equally well known to them. Show absolute unconcern, and they would wait. Keep walking, and they had to know the reason why. The view of his steadily moving back must be beginning to hypnotize them.

All the same it was tempting to make a dash for it. Through

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a house or shop? Into a back garden? The bushes of a park? But he hadn't a hope and knew it. There would always be a car or two on that parallel course and uniformed police somewhere in the background . . .

Nearly two hours now. Ten kilometers more or less. To do more in a straight line might not be convincing. They would accept it as normal that he should not take a taxi all the way to his rendezvous, but why not take one part of the way? He could imagine the debate behind him, one of them in favor of picking him up without delay, the other protesting against such a waste of the long grind.

So it was time for another sweetener. He looked at his watch and began to stroll more gently. He walked around two blocks and came back to his starting point. He saw the car again. That was careless of them. It confirmed that they had never detected any hint that he was on his guard.

Again he looked at his watch and made a gesture of impatience—hardly perceptible but they wouldn't miss it. He started to stride out at a good pace toward the outskirts of the city, and allowed that hypnotizing back view of his to show some anxiety.

He knew where he was going and when he meant to arrive. There might be a hope for him, just a slight hope, if the same two obstinate men continued on the job. Probably they would. After all their trouble they would ask permission to carry on. Headquarters would be very impressed indeed if they could follow their man across the whole city and out of it and discover his contact in the end. There was little point in substituting fresh agents for the two who by now were familiar with the suspect.

The real difficulty was not these two, but their unknown colleagues. The field. The rest of the hunt. Some occupation must be found to delay them. There was a newspaper seller ahead on the other side of the road. That would do. A shop would not. If he entered any sort of shop it would break the spell.

He crossed the road, bought two papers almost without slowing his stride, and walked straight on, feeling sorry for the newsdealer who was sure to be investigated in case more than a coin had passed between them.

He rolled up the papers as he walked, but had trouble in keeping them rolled. He needed two rubber bands or strips of gummed paper. He didn't have either. A couple of stamps were

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the only available means. And who the devil would take something from an inner pocket and stick it on rolled newspapers without stopping? Well, he must not stop, not on any account. They would have to work it out for themselves.

He kept walking, holding a rolled paper in each hand until the stamps held, the gum was safely dry. He knew what he wanted—a high fence or wall. In that district of builders' yards and small workshops it should not be hard to find. He saw the proper setting at last, up a turning to the right. There was a big printing works on one side, small houses on the other.

He turned sharply into the street, threw one of his newspapers over the printer's wall, and walked on. As soon as the two turned the corner and took up the trail, they wouldn't miss the obvious inference that one paper had gone over the wall and the other was still to be delivered.

He wouldn't be arrested now! He was really worth following. Especially since the printer happened to be a government printer. The newspaper would—presumably—be easily found, but what had been rolled up in it and who had picked it up? That unfortunate printing works was going to be turned inside out. He reckoned that the whole of the team would be instantly and urgently occupied except for his two followers. They had to stay with him as long as their feet held out.

He was clear of the inner suburbs and among the factories. The main avenue was landscaped, bordered by lawns and imposing offices. Behind it were the service roads, the waste lots, the dumps, the uninviting cafés. He looked at his watch, on this occasion because he really wanted to know the time. It was going to be a close thing, but he must not hurry.

Keeping his even, persuasive pace he turned off the avenue into the worst stretch of all, empty and far too long. Surely they must realize what was going to happen and arrest him now? He imagined he heard their footsteps closing up, but he dared not look back or run.

The third corner was a possibility. Far from perfect, but all the chance he was ever going to get. He shot round it and crouched behind a lump of concrete, once part of a wall and now standing shapeless among thistles. There were a few workers farther along the road, all busily occupied with brooms or vehicles or last-minute loading.

The two followed almost at

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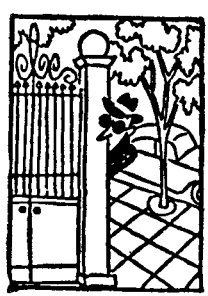
once without any precautions at all, startled out of their trance by his sudden evasion just as he hoped they would be. They were still the same pair, seen once near the mailbox two and a half hours earlier. Hurrying to restore the broken contact, they passed within two yards of his silenced gun with their eyes fixed ahead on the parked vehicles and the factory gate. He let them pass. It had not been his intention, but why take an unnecessary risk? Lucky for them that they had panicked and tried to catch up instead of searching the corner itself.

The factory clock struck six. Cars, bicycles, and pedestrians surged out of the gate and surrounded them. He saw them trying, he thought, to give orders. He took off his coat and tie, and unobtrusively mingled with the crowd when it reached him. At last he allowed himself to appear as tired as he felt, putting twenty years on his age. That would fix them, if they were in any position at all to pick out the back view of individuals from the mass.

He kept walking, now no longer alone, until he saw a bus ready to start. Where it went was unimportant; for him the destination was freedom. His identity was still unknown and his papers were in perfect order. After a few professional, very simple alterations in his appearance he could cross the frontier. He had earned freedom.



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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Selah! Even as your mentor climbs up to his rostrum for the reading of the lesson, permit me to announce at once that there will be corn in Egypt, good times a-coming, almost an *embarras de richesse* of the sensational. Beginning with detection extraordinary from two homicidal ladies at their slippery best, we proceed through detection in a different mood to mystery-adventure-espionage all the more deadly because every step of that narrow area has been mined or booby-trapped by the wrong enemy.

The dazzling display called *Murder-Go-Round* by Agatha Christie (Dodd, Mead, $7.95) offers *Thirteen at Dinner*, *The A.B.C. Murders*, and *Funerals Are Fatal*, three cases for Hercule Poirot spanning his creatrix's devious ways through two golden decades, '33 to '53.

Thirteen at Dinner, which years ago in England I read under the title of *Lord Edgware Dies*, piles illusion upon illusion when that finicky peer is stabbed under circumstances apparently damning to his light-headed wife. *The A.B.C. Murders*, by many considered Dame Agatha's masterpiece, was discussed in this column only a few months ago.

And that's not all. *Funerals Are Fatal*—through some oversight I missed it until now—will wallop you with a true Christie thunderbolt in the penultimate chapter. To this novel of rural dirty work, in my view, belongs the prize. Only a connoisseur will spot the murderer, and even he may choose the right culprit on the wrong evidence. It happened to me, I must admit; for which of us, in any fair contest, can outwit the Queen of Crime?

When first you glance at it, many elements of Ngaio Marsh's *Tied Up in Tinsel* (Little, Brown, $6.95) may seem all too familiar. At Halberds Manor, the luxurious country house of improbably named Hilary Bill-Tasman, that compulsive talker who has inherited his fortune from dubious sources, young Mr. Bill-Tasman is entertaining a Christmas party. We have the ailing uncle, the sharp-tongued aunt, the beautiful *fiancee*, the urbane

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old antique-dealer with the Cockney accent. We have the eccentric servants, each a proved ex-murderer. When somebody dresses up as an ancient Druid, bewigged and bewhiskered, no doubt death will claim its victim.

Sheer narrative skill touches familiar materials with novelty, even freshness. Ngaio Marsh, like Agatha Christie now a Dame Commander of the British Empire, gives us real people in a storm of emotion we can understand. And Dame Ngaio, no less wily than Dame Agatha herself, has devised a plot honorably fair but of double-distilled misdirection to bamboozle the unwary: strong entertainment for any reader.

In *Birthday, Deathday* by Hugh Pentecost (Dodd, Mead, $4.95), New York's super-swank Hotel Beaumont again provides a stage for bloody deeds and for the detective talent of Pierre Chambrun, its manager. Brutal, pitiless General Ho Chang will pay a visit this Eastern potentate may not survive. Neil Drury, whose family the general slaughtered, has vowed vengeance and disappeared.

But we can't hope for the success of a would-be murderer; or can we? Where might Neil Drury be hiding? And, in any case, how to crack that impenetrable ring of guards? Mr. Pentecost, one of our own most experienced bafflers, keeps tension at fever pitch as other crimes build towards confrontation and the eye of ultimate truth. Continue; have no fear. The finale won't let you down.

Since a secret agent in fiction so often must battle his own colleagues before meeting any alien foe, you will not be surprised that the whole action of Victor Canning's *Firecrest* (Morrow, $5.95) explodes inside that British hush-hushery called the Department, its favored weapon deceit and its cheapest commodity human life.

Professor Dilling, inspired both by genius and by his lissom mistress, Lily, has invented a secret weapon. Suspecting dirty work, he has hidden the plans of "Firecrest" before a heart attack strikes him dead. John Grimster, the Department's best operative, must take over Lily and find those missing plans.

Then, of course, they will eliminate Lily; they may eliminate their own agent too. A savage tug-of-war, Grimster against authority, wrenches muscles from London to the country, from Lily's bedroom to the lion-enclosure at Woburn. The final smash may be unjust; it may be unpleasant; given such premises, it is merely inevitable.

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

A Davis Publication — Published Monthly

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Dear Reader,

We are involved in a most unusual enterprise—indeed, a unique project. The Central American country of Nicaragua is considering the issue of a commemorative set of ten postage stamps to celebrate in 1973 the 50th Anniversary of Interpol. The specific theme may be a series of portraits, one to each stamp, of the ten most famous detectives in fiction, beginning with Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin and A. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes.

Would you care to nominate the ten most famous fictional detectives, the ten greatest of all time? You will find on the facing page a list of 21 fictional detectives to help you cast your votes, plus blank spaces for write-in nominations. All ballots must be signed and received at our New York editorial offices (address above) by September 1, 1972.

Voting results will be published in EQMM as soon as possible after September 1, 1972, together with a surprise—the first of a new series of stories about Interpol.

(tentative design showing portrait of Sherlock Holmes)

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Who are the 10 most famous detectives of fiction? The 10 greatest of all time?

(check here)

- ✓ Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin
- ✓ A. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes
- _____ Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin
- _____ R. Austin Freeman's Dr. John Thorndyke
- _____ G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown
- _____ Melville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner
- ✓ Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot
- ✓ Agatha Christie's Miss Jane Marple
- _____ Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey
- _____ Earl Derr Biggers's Charlie Chan
- _____ S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance
- _____ Ellery Queen's Ellery Queen
- ✓ Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade
- ✓ John Dickson Carr's Dr. Gideon Fell
- _____ Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason
- _____ Margery Allingham's Albert Campion
- ✓ Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe
- _____ Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe
- _____ Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret
- _____ Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer
- _____ J. J. Marric's George Gideon
- ✓ CARTER DICKSON: SIR HENRY MERRIVALE
- ✓ NICK + NORA CHARLES
- ✓ REX STOUT: ARCHIE GOODWIN

(please sign)_____

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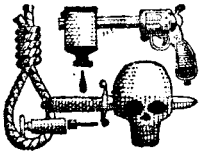

We published Josh Pachter's first story, "E. Q. Griffen Earns His Name," in the December 1968 issue of EQMM—when the author was 16 years old. We published his second story, another "adventure of Ellery in Queenland," in the May 1970 issue—when the author was 17 years old. His third story, about Nero Wolfe Griffen, appeared in our August 1971 issue—when the author was 18 years old. And now we give you Josh Pachter's fourth story—written when he was 19 years old, just before his 20th birthday.

In "Invitation to a Murder" Josh Pachter has deserted (temporarily?) the Griffen family and is now wholly on his own. You'll find the story off the beaten track, unusually imaginative, even in its melodrama, for so young a writer. Once again we ask: what will he write when he is older, much older? Young Pachter belongs to the mainstream of the mystery genre—he has a prodigious 'tec potential . . .

INVITATION TO A MURDER

by JOSH PACHTER

The envelope was edged in black.

Curious, Branigan put the rest of his mail aside and reached for the jeweled souvenir dagger he used as a letter opener. He slit the envelope open carefully and slid out a square of heavy cream-colored notepaper.

It, too, was black-rimmed.

It was a formal, embossed announcement, and the raised letters read:

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Eleanor Madeline Abbott

announces the impending

MURDER

of her husband,

Gregory Eliot Abbott,

at their home,

217A West 86th Street,

New York City, New York,

between the hours of

nine thirty and eleven o'clock

on the evening of December 16, 1971.

You are cordially invited to attend.

Branigan read through the invitation twice, then set it down on his desk and picked up the envelope it had come in. Heavy, cream-colored, black-bordered. Addressed in a neat feminine hand to *Chief Inspector Lawrence A. Branigan, New York Police Department, 240 Centre Street, New York City.* No zip code. No return address. Postmarked New York City.

Branigan picked up the announcement and read it again.

Eleanor Abbott, he mused. Mrs. Eleanor Madeline Abbott . . .

He reached for his telephone and began dialing.

Halfway down the dimly lit corridor, before a massive wooden door, they stopped.

The dour-faced butler stretched out a hand to the ornate brass doorknob, twisted it, and pushed the door open.

"In here, sir," he said. "Mrs. Abbott's expecting you."

Branigan nodded thanks and stepped forward.

The room was dim, too. Thick damask curtains hid what might have been windows; subdued lighting trickled down from small translucent panels in the ceiling.

It was a large, plain, sparsely furnished room. No rugs or

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carpeting on the parquet floor, no paintings hanging on the dar gloomy walls. There was nothing extra in the room, nothin decorative. Every item, every stick of furniture was there becaus it was functional, because it was needed.

Like the double bed with its head flush to the far wall.

There was a man lying on the bed, propped up almost to sitting position. His body was invisible, swathed to the neck i blankets, but his wrinkled white face almost shone through th dimness.

Gregory Abbott.

At first Branigan thought he was too late, and Abbott wa already dead: the pale-gray eyes, half covered by deeply crease lids, stared emptily across the room; the ravaged face, wreathed i wisps of snowy hair, was perfectly still; no smile of welcome, n frown of disapproval crossed the thin bloodless lips.

Then he noticed the slight rise and fall of the old man blankets, and separated the faint sound of labored breathing fro the steady ticking of the clock that hung on the wall several fe above Abbott's head.

Branigan sighed with relief, and looked away.

To his right a high-backed chair stood against the side wall. young woman sat on the edge of the chair, her hands folde delicately in her lap. She wore a long black gown, set off by single strand of pearls around her neck and a sparkling solitaire o the fourth finger of her left hand. Soft waves of thick fawn ha cascaded down around her shoulders.

Across the room from Eleanor Abbott a dozen identical chai stood side by side. The seat closest to Branigan was empty, bu each of the others was occupied. And even in the dimness of th room Branigan recognized all eleven faces. Ryan was there, fro the Los Angeles Police Department, and DiNapoli from Sa Francisco, both of whom he had worked with in the past. The was Coszyck, who ran a local detective agency; Huber, a insurance investigator from Boston he had met once before; an Braun, a Cleveland private eye whose picture had just bee featured in a national magazine. There was Devereux, a Feder District Court judge from New Orleans; Gould, a St. Lou appellate court justice; and even "the old Fox," just retired fro the bench of the United States Supreme Court. Maunder Detroit's District Attorney, was there, and Szambel fro Pittsburgh, and Carpenter, who had left Szambel's staff to becom

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D.A. of Baltimore. They were all looking at him, and he could see that most of them recognized him, too.

Fourteen people in all, lining the walls of a nearly dark, nearly quiet room, the silence broken only by Gregory Abbott's uneasy breathing and by the inexorable ticking of the clock.

Branigan's eyes finally rested on the plain deal table in the center of the room, and on the five objects resting on its surface: a long-bladed kitchen knife, a length of iron pipe, an amber bottle labeled with a skull and crossbones, a thin strand of wire with a wooden grip attached to each end, and a revolver that glinted dully in the dim light of the room.

Branigan eased the door shut behind him, then took a step forward.

Eleanor Abbot stood up. A long brown lock of hair fell across her eyes and she carelessly brushed it back with the tips of her fingers.

"Well," she smiled, "the foreman of the jury has arrived. I'm glad you could make it, Inspector Branigan. Now, if you'll just take your seat, we'll be ready to start."

She spoke softly, pleasantly, almost in a whisper, but her voice carried across the room. It was a good voice, Branigan decided. It suited her.

"I'm glad you were *all* able to get here," she resumed, once he was seated. "I wanted a nice even dozen of you—three dedicated police officers, three respected private investigators, three eminent judges, three successful District Attorneys. Twelve of the country's top legal and law-enforcement minds.

"I guess you must be wondering by now just *why* you're all here. Well, *your* reasons for coming are probably all different: you're here because your curiosity was piqued, or because you wanted to save a threatened human life, or perhaps because you didn't have anything better to do tonight. But *my* reason for bringing the twelve of you together is a simple one: as it said in your invitations, I want you to witness a murder."

She paused—dramatically, Branigan realized with a start. He glanced down the row of his colleagues' faces and saw eleven pairs of eyes fixed, unwavering, on Eleanor Abbott. Only the old man in the bed was not looking at her; his blank eyes never moved from an invisible spot on the door across the room.

"Now," she went on, "for some history. I was born in Philadelphia on September 13, 1945. I came to New York about

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four years ago, when I was twenty-two. Over the next couple of years I lived in a lot of different places around the city and worked a lot of different jobs. About a year and a half ago I was working at a little restaurant in Greenwich Village, waiting on tables.

"One night Gregory came in with a crowd of friends. They ate and left without paying any more attention to me than anyone ever pays to a waitress; but when I got off work a few hours later, Gregory was waiting for me outside."

For the first time since Branigan had entered the room she turned to look at the man on the bed. After a while she sighed and turned back.

"Gregory was an incredible man. He was in his late sixties, but he looked fifty, then, and he had the energy of a man of thirty. He pretty much swept me off my feet—he was charming and full of life, and he was very rich, too. He'd started with a small store that used to be his father's, and he'd built it up into a chain of department stores worth millions.

"So there I was: I'd been living on sixty dollars a week plus tips and thinking I was pretty lucky to be doing that well. Then all of a sudden there was Gregory.

"We were married inside of three months.

"Please, don't get me wrong. I loved him, I really did. He was a wonderful person, the first person who'd really *cared* about me in years. I would have married him even if he *hadn't* had all that money, and we would have been just as happy.

"It was an exciting marriage for both of us. Gregory never liked sitting still, so we were always moving, doing, going places. There was nothing he liked better than nightclubbing until three or four in the morning, drinking and dancing and—I'd never done that kind of thing before in my life, but it didn't take me long to learn to enjoy it as much as he did. He was a wonderful dancer."

She stopped for a second, looking through them, remembering.

"I used to make him mad," she smiled. "I was always telling him he should start slowing down a little. But he never listened. He—"

She broke off and turned again to the double bed. There was mist in her eyes.

"Less than six months after our wedding Gregory tripped and fell down a flight of stairs. I was with him when it happened. It—it was terrible. The shock of the fall brought on a very serious heart attack.

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"He was in critical condition for a long time. Somehow he managed to pull through, but it left him like—like *that*—totally paralyzed. He can't hear or see. He can't even think.

"For some time now the only thing that's changed is the way he looks. He never gets any better or any worse, just every day he looks a little bit older than he did the day before. Gregory's sixty-eight years old, but *look* at him! You'd *swear* he's eighty!

"His doctors say there's no chance that he'll ever recover, but they think that with the proper care and treatment it should be possible to keep him alive for as long as ten years.

"Ten years! Can—can you even *conceive* of what that means? Ten *years!* That's a hundred and twenty months—of *nothing!*

"Nothing. Absolute *nothing.* That's the worst thing in the world that could have happened to Gregory, can you understand that? As long as he was active he was happy, but any time he had to just sit and relax, he was miserable. He knew he was pushing himself too hard, but he just didn't *care.* He couldn't *stand* being idle. If he'd have known *this* was going to happen, he'd have—he would have *killed* himself first! He would have died *gladly* before he'd let himself waste ten years of his life in a—in a bed!"

Then her lips were trembling, and suddenly her face was buried in her hands and her whole body was shaking.

Branigan leaned forward. He wanted to go to her, to wipe away the tears he knew were coming—

But suddenly she shuddered and took a long deep breath. When she looked up again, her face was drawn, her eyes were dry and cold.

"There's more to it than that," she went on. "When we got married, Gregory rewrote his will in my favor. Right now my share of his estate is worth close to ten million dollars. And I want that money.

"I've been taking care of Gregory twenty-four hours a day, every day, for more than nine months now, and I'm tired of it. There's too much else to do, too many other things that are more important. I want that money and I want it *now*—while I'm still young enough and attractive enough to enjoy it."

There was something new in her voice, something insistent, almost hypnotic, and they stared at her, as motionless as the old man in the double bed.

"Yes, I love Gregory. *Because* I love him, I just *can't* let him go on like this any more. And *I* can't go on this way any more, either.

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Which means there's only one thing for me to do.

"I've got to kill him. For both our sakes. I think—I think if Gregory knew I was going to do it, he'd say I was doing the right thing, the only thing."

"Wait a minute," Branigan interrupted, but she smiled at him and said, "I know, Inspector. Murder is against the law, no matter how morally justifiable it might be. That's another reason I brought the twelve of you here: to give you a chance to stop me. If you can, I give you my word I won't try it again.

"But I'm warning you: I am going to kill my husband, tonight, within an hour's time. It's now"—she turned her head to glance at the clock hanging over the bed—"it is now ten o'clock. By eleven o'clock, in one hour, Gregory Abbott will be dead."

No one spoke. The woman in the long black gown sat down to complete silence, except for the weak sound of her husband's breathing and the ticking of the clock on the wall.

They sat looking at each other, quiet, spellbound, waiting, not quite sure what they should be doing, not at all sure there was anything they *could* do.

Until 10:10 when Eleanor Abbott rose, walked quickly to the table of weapons in the center of the room, and picked up the amber bottle of poison.

Then they moved, and strong hands grabbed her from both sides before she could step away from the table. Branigan pulled the bottle away from her, and he and Coszyck led her back to her chair. Then they went back to their own seats.

At 10:20 she rose again. She was halfway to the table when Branigan and Coszyck stopped her, turned her around, and again reseated her.

This time they stayed by her chair, one on each side.

Again the old man's breathing and the ticking of the clock were the only sounds in the room. Once Carpenter put a hand to his mouth and coughed softly. Eleanor Abbott seemed not to notice, and Gregory Abbott stared vacantly; the others glared at him.

At 10:30 Huber jumped up and moved impatiently from his seat to the old man's bedside. He went down to his hands and knees and carefully examined the area underneath the bed. As he straightened up, dusting off the legs of his trousers, Braun and Devereux looked at each other, nodded, and got up and joined him. The three ranged themselves on three sides of the bed, watching Abbott and his wife and the clock uneasily.

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At 10:40 Eleanor Abbott suddenly stood up, but Branigan and Coszyck clamped firm hands on her shoulders and forced her back into her chair.

Not a word was said.

The red second hand of the clock swept around and around, as the minute hand labored slowly up the numbered face. DiNapoli glanced from the clock to his wrist watch, then quickly back at the clock. He frowned, then silently adjusted his watch so that the two timepieces were synchronized.

At 10:50 Maunders and Fox stood up together, grim-faced, and stepped to the table of weapons. Fox, his arthritic fingers quivering slightly, picked up the dull-black revolver. He broke open the cylinder, emptied out the cartridges, shrugged, put the cartridges in his pocket, snapped the cylinder shut, and placed the gun back on the table.

At 10:55 Branigan and Coszyck rested their hands lightly on Mrs. Abbott's shoulders.

Devereux, at Abbott's bedside, pulled a handkerchief from his hip pocket and wiped beads of moisture from his forehead.

The old man on the bed breathed weakly, in and out, in and out, and the pile of blankets rose and fell almost imperceptibly.

At 10:57 Gould stood up fitfully, then flung himself back into his chair.

10:58. They tensed.

Huber and Braun and Devereux inched closer to the old man's bed. Branigan and Coszyck tightened their grips on Eleanor Abbott's shoulders. Maunders and Fox braced themselves, as if defying her to seize one of the weapons on the table. Even the five men still seated—Szambel, Carpenter, DiNapoli, Ryan, Gould—found themselves on the edges of their chairs, ready to spring into action.

But as the clock on the wall ticked loudly and its minute hand crawled closer and closer to the twelve, Eleanor Abbott sat calmly on her high-backed chair—and didn't move.

At 10:59 Gregory Eliot Abbott's breathing stopped. His wrinkled eyelids flickered, jerked open, then closed.

"Gentlemen!" Eleanor Abbott's voice shot through the uproar. "If you'll all get back to your seats and calm down, I'd be glad to explain."

They obeyed her.

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She stood by the side of her chair, watching them, her full lips turned slightly upward.

"I warned you," she said. "I told you I was going to kill him, and I did."

"How?" Huber rasped.

Her smile broadened.

"My husband's accident left his heart much too weak to function normally by itself. In fact, the only thing that kept it going was a certain medication, a heart stimulant he was getting at regular intervals."

Branigan's eyes went wide. She waited, though, until Maunders saw it and Szambel, and DiNapoli.

"Gregory's stimulant," she continued, pointing to the table of weapons, "is kept in that bottle there. It's an extremely powerful drug, which makes it very dangerous to people with normal hearts. If a healthy person was to swallow some of it, his heart would speed up enormously, and would actually burn itself out. That's why the bottle is labeled with a skull and crossbones: even a small dose could be fatal to the wrong person.

"But Gregory needed that stimulant to stay alive, and he needed it frequently. He was due for a dose just after ten o'clock. I *tried* to give it to him, but you stopped me."

"You said it was poison!" Carpenter protested.

"I said no such thing. You *assumed* it was poison. But it was vital medicine for Gregory, and each of the three times I tried to give it to him you prevented me. Without it his heart just wasn't strong enough to keep beating, so he died—almost to the minute I predicted."

The twelve criminologists were silent.

Until, "Well?" Ryan said, his voice thick.

"Well," Eleanor Abbott told them, "there are only two possible things you can do. You can take me into custody and accuse me of murdering my husband—but just stop and think about that for a minute. What good will it do? You'll obviously never get a conviction. After all, *I* tried to save Gregory. *You* are the ones who stopped me, causing his death. *You* killed him, not me. In fact, you might even be *legally* responsible for his death. But even if you're not, once the story gets out of how you sat back and let this happen, your names and reputations will be ruined. Your careers will be over."

"She's right," Judge Gould said heavily. "Sure, she'd get

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slapped on the wrist for not telling us what was in the bottle, but with a story like this, no jury in the country would convict her of murder."

"And we'd be sunk," Carpenter added. "Nobody would dare to try and make out any kind of case against us, but the publicity would destroy us."

Fox cleared his throat nervously.

"You said we had *two* possible courses of action," he reminded her.

"Yes, I did. You can turn me in—or you can work *with* me. Did I really do anything so terrible? I'm not the only one to benefit from Gregory's death: *Gregory* is better off, too. Together we could make his death look like an unhappy, but unavoidable accident."

"You want us to help you get away with murder?" Szambel demanded.

She held up a hand.

"I'm not asking for any favors. Arrest me and ruin yourselves—or help to protect me. The choice is entirely yours."

"We can't!" Devereux cried. "We've all dedicated our lives to *upholding* the law. How can we turn around now and make a mockery of it?"

"We've got to," DiNapoli muttered. "She's got us over a barrel. There's no other way out."

Maunders grumbled, "Even if we wanted to, it would be impossible. We'd never get away with it."

"The twelve of *us?*" Judge Gould chuckled grimly. "Don't be ridiculous. Who'd even *think* of challenging us?"

Then Branigan decided, "We'll *all* have to discuss it."

She waved a hand at them and turned away.

They talked. Across the room Eleanor Abbott was unable to make out individual voices or words, but she listened confidently to the meaningless hum, smiled at explosions of protest, smirked at the eventual murmurs of agreement.

When they finally became silent, she turned to face them.

They were staring at her.

"Gentlemen of the jury," she mocked, "have you reached a verdict?"

Branigan stood up. There was a strange light in his eyes, a light that Eleanor Abbott could not have known, a light that had never been there before.

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"We have," he said clearly.

And he stopped, waiting.

For an instant she was confused; then she grinned and completed the ritual: "How do you find?"

"We find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree, as charged."

Her smile faded.

"What—what do you mean?" she asked him, not understanding

But when Branigan left the jury box and walked quickly to the table of weapons in the center of the room and reached out his hand, she understood.

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This is the 370th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a story strange in style and substance, but with a strong emotional impact. An impressive debut in print . . .

The author, David Morrell, was in his late twenties when he submitted "The Dripping," and Assistant Professor of American Literature at the University of Iowa. He was raised in Ontario, Canada, and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. at the Pennsylvania State University, where he taught fiction writing. When not teaching or writing he likes riding horses, target shooting, and scuba diving.

We hope to receive more stories from Mr. Morrell—stories strange, and strangely told . . .

THE DRIPPING

by DAVID MORRELL

That autumn we live in a house in the country, my mother's house, the house I was raised in. I have been to the village, struck more by how nothing in it has changed, yet everything has, because I am older now, seeing it differently. It is as though I am both here now and back then, at once with the mind of a boy and a man. It is so strange a doubling, so intense, so unsettling, that I am moved to work again, to try to paint it.

So I study the hardware store, the grain barrels in front, the twin square pillars holding up the drooping balcony onto which seared wax-faced men and women from the old people's hotel above come to sit and rock and watch. They look the same aging people I saw as a boy, the wood of the pillars and balcony looks as splintered.

Forgetful of time while I work, I do not begin the long walk home until late, at dusk. The day has been warm, but

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now in my shirt I am cold, and a half mile along I am caught in a sudden shower and forced to leave the gravel road for the shelter of a tree, its leaves already brown and yellow. The rain becomes a storm, streaking at me sideways, drenching me; I cinch the neck of my canvas bag to protect my painting and equipment, and decide to run, socks spongy in my shoes, when at last I reach the lane down tc the house and barn.

The house and barn. They and my mother, they alone have changed, as if as one, warping, weathering, joints twisted and strained, their gray so unlike the white I recall as a boy. The place is weakening her. She is in tune with it, matches its decay. That is why we have come here to live. To revive. Once I thought to convince her to move away. But of her 65 years she has spent 40 here, and she insists she will spend the rest, what is left to her.

The rain falls stronger as I hurry past the side of the house, the light on in the kitchen, suppertime and I am late. The house is connected with the barn the way the small base of an L is connected to its stem. The entrance I always use is directly at the joining, and when I enter out of breath, clothes clinging to me cold and wet, the door to the barn to my left, the door to the kitchen straight ahead, I hear the dripping in the basement down the stairs to my right.

"Meg. Sorry I'm late," I call to my wife, setting down the water-beaded canvas sack, opening the kitchen door. There is no one. No settings on the table. Nothing on the stove. Only the yellow light from the sixty-watt bulb in the ceiling. The kind my mother prefers to the white of one hundred. It reminds her of candlelight, she says.

"Meg," I call again, and still no one answers. Asleep, I think. Dusk coming on, the dark clouds of the storm have lulled them, and they have lain down for a nap, expecting to wake before I return.

Still the dripping. Although the house is very old, the barn long disused, roofs crumbling, I have not thought it all so ill-maintained, the storm so strong that water can be seeping past the cellar windows, trickling, pattering on the old stone floor. I switch on the light to the basement, descend the wood stairs to the right, worn and squeaking, reach where the stairs turn to the left the rest of the way down to the floor, and see not water dripping. Milk. Milk everywhere. On the rafters, on the walls, dripping

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on the film of milk on the stones, gathering speckled with dirt in the channels between them. From side to side and everywhere.

Sarah, my child, has done this, I think. She has been fascinated by the big wood dollhouse that my father made for me when I was quite young, its blue paint chipped and peeling now. She has pulled it from the far corner to the middle of the basement. There are games and toy soldiers and blocks that have been taken from the wicker storage chest and played with on the floor, all covered with milk, the dollhouse, the chest, the scattered toys, milk dripping on them from the rafters, milk trickling on them.

Why has she done this, I think. Where can she have gotten so much milk? What was in her mind to do this thing?

"Sarah," I call. "Meg." Angry now, I mount the stairs into the quiet kitchen. "Sarah," I shout. She will clean the mess and stay indoors the remainder of the week.

I cross the kitchen, turn through the sitting room past the padded flower-patterned chairs and sofa that have faded since I knew them as a boy, past several of my paintings that my mother has hung up on the wall, bright-colored old ones of pastures and woods from when I was in grade school, brown-shaded new ones of the town, tinted as if old photographs. Two stairs at a time up to the bedrooms, wet shoes on the soft worn carpet on the stairs, hand streaking on the smooth polished maple bannister.

At the top I swing down the hall. The door to Sarah's room is open, it is dark in there. I switch on the light. She is not on the bed, nor has been; the satin spread is unrumpled, the rain pelting in through the open window, the wind fresh and cool. I have the feeling then and go uneasy into our bedroom; it is dark as well, empty too. My stomach has become hollow. Where are they? All in mother's room?

No. As I stand at the open door to mother's room I see from the yellow light I have turned on in the hall that only she is in there, her small torso stretched across the bed.

"Mother," I say, intending to add, "Where are Meg and Sarah?" But I stop before I do. One of my mother's shoes is off, the other askew on her foot. There is mud on the shoes. There is blood on her cotton dress. It is torn, her brittle hair disrupted, blood on her face, her bruised lips are swollen.

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For several moments I am silent with shock. "My God, Mother," I finally manage to say, and as if the words are a spring releasing me to action I touch her to wake her. But I see that her eyes are open, staring ceilingward, unseeing though alive, and each breath is a sudden full gasp, then slow exhalation.

"Mother, what has happened? Who did this to you? Meg? Sarah?"

But she does not look at me, only constant toward the ceiling.

"For God's sake, Mother, answer me! Look at me! What has happened?"

Nothing. Eyes sightless. Between gasps she is like a statue.

What I think is hysterical. Disjointed, contradictory. I must find Meg and Sarah. They must be somewhere, beaten like my mother. Or worse. Find them. Where? But I cannot leave my mother. When she comes to consciousness, she too will be hysterical, frightened, in great pain. How did she end up on the bed?

In her room there is no sign of the struggle she must have put up against her attacker. It must have happened somewhere else. She crawled from there to here. Then I see the blood on the floor, the swath of blood down the hall from the stairs. Who did this? Where is he? Who would beat a gray, wrinkled, arthritic old woman? Why in God's name would he do it? I shudder. The pain of the arthritis as she struggled with him.

Perhaps he is still in the house, waiting for me.

To the hollow sickness in my stomach now comes fear, hot, pulsing, and I am frantic before I realize what I am doing—grabbing the spare cane my mother always keeps by her bed, flicking on the light in her room, throwing open the closet door and striking in with the cane. Viciously, sounds coming from my throat, the cane flailing among the faded dresses.

No one. Under the bed. No one. Behind the door. No one.

I search all the upstairs rooms that way, terrified, constantly checking behind me, clutching the cane and whacking into closets, under beds, behind doors, with a force that would certainly crack a skull. No one.

"Meg! Sarah!"

No answer, not even an echo in this sound-absorbing house.

There is no attic, just an overhead entry to a crawl space under the eaves, and that opening has long been sealed. No sign of tampering. No one has gone up.

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I rush down the stairs, seeing the trail of blood my mother has left on the carpet, imagining her pain as she crawled, and search the rooms downstairs with the same desperate thoroughness. In the front closet. Behind the sofa and chairs. Behind the drapes.

No one.

I lock the front door, lest he be outside in the storm waiting to come in behind me. I remember to draw every blind, close every drape, lest he be out there peering at me. The rain pelts insistently against the windowpanes.

I cry out again and again for Meg and Sarah. The police. My mother. A doctor. I grab for the phone on the wall by the front stairs, fearful to listen to it, afraid he has cut the line outside. But it is droning. Droning. I ring for the police, working the handle at the side around and around and around.

They are coming, they say. A doctor with them. Stay where I am, they say. But I cannot. Meg and Sarah, I must find them. I know they are not in the basement where the milk is dripping—all the basement is open to view. Except for my childhood things, we have cleared out all the boxes and barrels and the shelves of jars the Saturday before.

But under the stairs. I have forgotten about under the stairs and now I race down and stand dreading in the milk; but there are only cobwebs there, already reformed from Saturday when we cleared them. I look up at the side door I first came through, and as if I am seeing through a telescope I focus largely on the handle. It seems to fidget. I have a panicked vision of the intruder bursting through, and I charge up to lock the door, and the door to the barn.

And then I think: if Meg and Sarah are not in the house they are likely in the barn. But I cannot bring myself to unlock the barn door and go through. *He* must be there as well. Not in the rain outside but in the shelter of the barn, and there are no lights to turn on there.

And why the milk? Did he do it and where did he get it? And why? Or did Sarah do it before? No, the milk is too freshly dripping. It has been put there too recently. By him. But why? And who is he? A tramp? An escapee from some prison? Or asylum? No, the nearest institution is far away, hundreds of miles. From the town then. Or a nearby farm.

I know my questions are for delay, to keep me from entering the barn. But I must. I take the flashlight from the kitchen

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drawer and unlock the door to the barn, force myself to go in quickly, cane ready, flashing my light. The stalls are still there, listing; and some of the equipment, churners, separators, dull and rusted, webbed and dirty. The must of decaying wood and crumbled hay, the fresh wet smell of the rain gusting through cracks in the walls. Once this was a dairy, as the other farms around still are.

Flicking my light toward the corners, edging toward the stalls, boards creaking, echoing, I try to control my fright, try to remember as a boy how the cows waited in the stalls for my father to milk them, how the barn was once board-tight and solid, warm to be in, how there was no connecting door from the barn to the house because my father did not want my mother to smell the animals in her kitchen.

I run my light down the walls, sweep it in arcs through the darkness before me as I draw nearer to the stalls, and in spite of myself I recall that other autumn when the snow came early, four feet deep by morning and still storming thickly, how my father went out to the barn to milk and never returned for lunch, nor supper. There was no phone then, no way to get help, and my mother and I waited all night, unable to make our way through the storm, listening to the slowly dying wind; and the next morning was clear and bright and blinding as we shoveled out to find the cows in agony in their stalls from not having been milked and my father dead, frozen rock-solid in the snow in the middle of the next field where he must have wandered when he lost his bearings in the storm.

There was a fox, risen earlier than us, nosing at him under the snow, and my father had to be sealed in his coffin before he could lie in state. Days after, the snow was melted, gone, the barnyard a sea of mud, and it was autumn again and my mother had the connecting door put in. My father should have tied a rope from the house to his waist to guide him back in case he lost his way. Certainly he knew enough. But then he was like that, always in a rush. When I was ten.

Thus I think as I light the shadows near the stalls, terrified of what I may find in any one of them, Meg and Sarah, or him, thinking of how my mother and I searched for my father and how I now search for my wife and child, trying to think of how it was once warm in here and pleasant, chatting with my father, helping him to milk, the sweet smell of new

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hay and grain, the different sweet smell of fresh droppings, something I always liked and neither my father nor my mother could understand. I know that if I do not think of these good times I will surely go mad in awful anticipation of what I may find. Pray God they have not died!

What can he have done to them? To assault a five-year-old girl? Split her. The hemorrhaging alone can have killed her.

And then, even in the barn, I hear my mother cry out for me. The relief I feel to leave and go to her unnerves me. I do want to find Meg and Sarah, to try to save them. Yet I am relieved to go. I think my mother will tell me what has happened, tell me where to find them. That is how I justify my leaving as I wave the light in circles around me, guarding my back, retreating through the door and locking it.

Upstairs she sits stiffly on her bed. I want to make her answer my questions, to shake her, to force her to help, but I know it will only frighten her more, maybe push her mind down to where I can never reach.

"Mother," I say to her softly, touching her gently. "What has happened?" My impatience can barely be contained. "Who did this? Where are Meg and Sarah?"

She smiles at me, reassured by the safety of my presence. Still she cannot answer.

"Mother. Please," I say. "I know how bad it must have been. But you must try to help. I must know where they are so I can help them."

She says, "Dolls."

It chills me. "What dolls, Mother? Did a man come here with dolls? What did he want? You mean he looked like a doll? Wearing a mask like one?"

Too many questions. All she can do is blink.

"Please, Mother. You must try your best to tell me. Where are Meg and Sarah?"

"Dolls," she says.

As I first had the foreboding of disaster at the sight of Sarah's unrumpled satin bedspread, now I am beginning to understand, rejecting it, fighting it.

"Yes, Mother, the dolls," I say, refusing to admit what I know. "Please, Mother. Where are Meg and Sarah?"

"You are a grown boy now. You must stop playing as a child. Your father. Without him you will have to be the man in the house. You must be brave."

"No, Mother." I can feel it swelling in my chest.

"There will be a great deal of work now, more than any child should know. But we have no

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choice. You must accept that God has chosen to take him from us, that you are all the man I have left to help me."

"No, Mother."

"Now you are a man and you must put away the things of a child."

Eyes streaming, I am barely able to straighten, leaning wearily against the door jamb, tears rippling from my face down to my shirt, wetting it cold where it had just begun to dry. I wipe my eyes and see her reaching for me, smiling, and I recoil down the hall, stumbling down the stairs, down, through the sitting room, the kitchen, down, down to the milk, splashing through it to the dollhouse, and in there, crammed and doubled, Sarah. And in the wicker chest, Meg. The toys not on the floor for Sarah to play with, but taken out so Meg could be put in. And both of them, their stomachs slashed, stuffed with sawdust, their eyes rolled up like dolls' eyes.

The police are knocking at the side door, pounding, calling out who they are, but I am powerless to let them in. They crash through the door, their rubber raincoats dripping as they stare down at me.

"The milk," I say.

They do not understand. Even as I wait, standing in the milk, listening to the rain pelting on the windows while they come over to see what is in the dollhouse and in the wicker chest, while they go upstairs to my mother and then return so I can tell them again, "The milk." But they still do not understand.

"She killed them of course," one man says. "But I don't see why the milk."

Only when they speak to the neighbors down the road and learn how she came to them, needing the cans of milk, insisting she carry them herself to the car, the agony she was in as she carried them, only when they find the empty cans and the knife in a stall in the barn, can I say, "The milk. The blood. There was so much blood, you know. She needed to deny it, so she washed it away with milk, purified it, started the dairy again. You see, there was so much blood."

That autumn we live in a house in the country, my mother's house, the house I was raised in. I have been to the village, struck even more by how nothing in it has changed, yet everything has, because I am older now, seeing it differently. It is as though I am both here now and back then, at once with the mind of a boy and a man . . .

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"You might call it . . . a mission in life . . . passed on to each new generation by the preceding one" . . .

THE LEGACY

by R. L. STEVENS

The old place looked more deteriorated than it had on my last visit, perhaps reflecting the condition of its occupant. For certainly Uncle Alpha was crumbling as surely as the stone pillars that held up the faded front porch.

The nurse, all starched and breathless, met me at the front door. "He's kept me running today," she said. "He'll be glad to see you."

"How does he feel?"

She arched an eyebrow. "Since two months ago? I think you'll find he's failed considerably. This isn't the place for him, Mr. Cayhill. He belongs in a nursing home."

I glanced sideways at her. "You mean under psychiatric care."

"I didn't say that. He's quite rational much of the time."

"Thank you, Miss Murray. I'll speak to you about it later."

I left her at the door and entered his room. If I'd expected to find Uncle Alpha in bed, or sitting in the great old rocking chair he used as a throne, I was disappointed. He was on his feet, shuffling through some papers with his arthritic old fingers. He turned as I entered and motioned me to a chair by the bed.

Alpha Cayhill was my father's older brother and with the passing years he had become my only living relative. He was a wealthy man who'd made a fortune in real estate, had divorced his first wife years ago, and had never remarried. Now, in his mid-seventies, he'd been struck down with a variety of afflictions that confined him to his house and were sapping his strength. I knew, as I had known for the past year, that any one of my bimonthly visits could be the last.

For some reason Uncle Alpha had taken a liking to me and had begun to look forward to my visits. Now, turning toward me, he said, "I thought you would never come, Charles. You've been neglecting an old man."

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"You're not that old, Uncle Alpha."

"Old enough, Charles. Old enough. Here, help me over to my chair."

"Have you been out of the house at all? The weather's fine."

"I don't get out any more. The old legs are only good for a few steps at a time."

"That's too bad. Do you have everything you need? Does Nurse Murray take good care of you?"

"Oh, she's all right," the old man admitted grudgingly. "She's nice to look at, anyway . . ." His voice trailed off and he seemed deep in thought. Finally he lifted his eyes to meet mine. "Charles, we must have a talk."

"Certainly, Uncle. Anytime you want."

"No, no, not anytime. Now, right now."

I glanced at my watch. Although my evening was free I was reluctant to spend it listening to my uncle's rambling reminiscences of better days. "Really, Uncle Alpha, I must be—"

"Our family has a legacy, Charles, a legacy to be passed from one generation to the next. This is something I've never told you before. In fact, I've never breathed it to a living soul."

"A legacy?" I was not so well off that I could walk out on talk of money. "Don't you have a will?"

"It is not that sort of legacy. It is, rather, a legacy of deeds."

"Deeds? You mean—actions?"

There was something lurking in his eyes. It could have been madness or cunning, but it was there. "If it has something to do with a political action group, Uncle, I'm afraid I don't have time for it. My business keeps me pretty well tied down, you know."

"It's nothing like that," the old man assured me. A sly smile played about the corners of his mouth. "What would you say if I were to tell you I had killed somebody?"

"Killed? You mean in the war?"

He smiled. "Charles, there is so much to tell you, so much to prepare you for. You are the only one I have, so the legacy of the family must pass down to you. Whatever you make of it—a blessing or a curse—is up to you to continue."

All I could say was, "I don't understand you. What's all this about killing someone?"

"Help me over to the bookcase. I have something to show you."

He needed a hand now, because his legs were wobbly.

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After two heart attacks it was an effort for him to stay on his feet. I pressed my arm around his thin shoulder and guided him to the bookcase. He took down a red-leather album and clutched it to his chest. When I offered to carry it for him he hugged it even tighter.

"What is it, Uncle?"

"You might call it our family tree. Your legacy, Charles." He opened the album from the back and I saw at once that it was filled with neatly clipped newspaper accounts. Of murders.

"What is this?"

"A mission in life, Charles. Passed on to each new generation by the preceding one. I have no son, so the legacy must be given to you."

His eyes were glowing now, and I wondered if he might be feverish. "You mean all these killings? Are you telling me you had something to do with them?"

"I killed them, Charles. I killed them all, just as our family has for more than four generations."

I was staring at the headline on one article. It was from a Boston newspaper of a decade ago, and it read: *Cambridge Woman Believed Latest Strangler Victim.* My eyes scanned the account with growing apprehension, and finally I lowered the album to say, "But this is about those Boston murders—the Boston Strangler."

"Yes."

"The man who killed them—didn't he confess?"

"He could only have killed two. I killed the rest."

His voice was so calm in contrast with the fire in his eyes that it took a moment before the chill started down my back. I had almost believed him, and perhaps believing would have been preferable to the knowledge that Uncle Alpha had finally succumbed to his wild imaginings. "I don't believe that, Uncle. You couldn't have done anything as brutal. The Boston killings, as I remember them, were the acts of a sex criminal."

"Yes," he said simply.

"But you would have been in your mid-sixties then."

"Nevertheless, I killed them. I killed them because our family's legacy had passed down to me. And that is the legacy I now pass on to you."

"Uncle—"

"No, no, let me go on!" He flipped forward a few pages in the album. "Perhaps you wonder who it was that revealed this family secret to me. I lived in London for a time in the early nineteen-fifties, you'll remember, and it was there I met my wife's uncle. It

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was he who instructed me."

"Instructed? You mean he killed women, too?"

Uncle Alpha nodded. "Unfortunately, he was later apprehended by the police and put to death. His name was John Christie."

"Uncle Alpha, are you telling me that John Christie, the British mass murderer, instructed you in the killing of women?"

"Of course. How else would I have known? Our methods were different, of course. He generally used gas, while I almost always strangled my victims. But then John Christie's own mentor—a cousin back in America—used an ax."

My mind could not grasp his words. The man was mad, totally and completely mad, and I only wanted a way out before his madness engulfed me, too. "Don't tell me John Christie's cousin was Lizzie Borden," I said, trying to make a joke of it.

"No, he was the much more successful Axeman of New Orleans, who killed a number of people—mainly Italian grocers and their wives—between 1911 and 1919. The Axeman violated the legacy by killing men as well as women, but he could be excused. John Christie told me he was mad."

"I see," I muttered, not knowing what else to say.

"Before the Axeman, of course, there was his father. He was the most famous of us all."

"His father?"

"Jack the Ripper."

"Uncle—"

"You don't believe me? Is that it? But look—here are all the clippings!"

He turned to the front of the album and I stared at the yellowed pages from *The Penny Illustrated Paper* and *The Times* and the *Reynolds News* and the *Daily Telegraph.* Words like "Ripper" and "Whitechapel" leaped out at me. "You've collected these all your life?" I asked, dazed.

"My predecessors began the collection. I have only added my part. I estimate the family has killed fifty-five women in the past hundred years, with several men thrown in for good measure. All the crimes were not reported, of course."

I got unsteadily to my feet. "I must be going, Uncle. I have a business engagement."

"But we've only begun to talk! There's so much more to discuss! Your choice of weapon, for instance. The Ripper used a knife, of course, but there's something to be said for the other methods—the ax or gas or my own method, strangulation."

"We'll talk again, Uncle. I

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really must be going now."

"If you must." He leaned toward me. "Oh, you realize this is absolutely secret. I wouldn't want a word of it getting around."

"Of course not," I assured him, grim-faced. We shook hands and I left.

Nurse Murray was waiting downstairs. "Well! That was a short visit!"

I nodded. "I'm afraid what you've been saying about his mental condition is no exaggeration. He needs care, and I'll have to see that he gets it. As soon as possible."

Nurse Murray nodded.

"He has terrible delusions. I'm afraid he'll have to be put away somewhere," I added.

The nurse held the door open for me. "Do something soon. He's not getting any better."

But I did not do anything soon. Or not soon enough. Three days later a detective named Yates was waiting at my office when I returned from lunch.

"Your uncle is Alpha Cayhill?"

"That's correct."

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Mr. Cayhill. We found his body this morning. He died of a heart attack sometime during the night."

"A heart—"

The detective nodded and hurried on. "Apparently he surprised a burglar in his home and the shock was too much for his heart. The nurse who cared for him, Miss Murray, was killed by the burglar."

"Miss Murray? Dead?"

"I'm afraid so. A horrible crime. Perhaps your uncle was trying to rescue her when his heart gave out."

I sank into my chair. "My God! Do you have any idea who did it?"

"None whatever. We're still searching the house for clues." He cleared his throat. "We understand you are Mr. Cayhill's only living relative. You'll be handling the funeral arrangements?"

"Of course."

The detective nodded. "I'll be going, then. Sorry I had to bring you such bad news."

"Tell me one thing. How was Nurse Murray killed?"

The detective frowned. "How? She was strangled."

"The events I have recounted occurred in the early 1970s. You might wonder, my son, why I am telling you all this now, some twenty-five years later. If you would be so good as to hand me that red-leather album from the bookcase . . ."

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Thank the Lord, series detectives never die . . . It is ten years since we published the first (and seemingly the last) story about Professor Atwater and his cronies of the Addison Club, known as the Curious Quints. Let us refresh your memory. The Curious Quints were originally five old codgers who liked to pit their wits against each other and "explore useless and fantastic subjects." They met the first night of every month, and their "conjectural discussions" probed such topics as: On what did Conan Doyle base his belief in spiritualism? What was the numerical strength of Queen Zenobia's army?

Well, as so often happens (in fiction), one case of "speculative ratiocination" leads to another. Here's what a meeting devoted to theories explaining how the Song of Songs got into the Bible led to . . .

THE MOST WANTED MAN IN THE COUNTRY

by ***DON*** *KNOWLTON*

The first of August was hot that year. The Curious Quints had held their regular first-of-the-month evening meeting, and two of them had dropped off for a nightcap at the bachelor apartment of Silas Atwater, the (barely) oldest of the Quints, former head of the English Department of Bington University.

The first thing the three did was to take off their coats and ties, for the Curious Quints' meeting had been, as always, rather formal. Then Atwater retired to his kitchen to fetch Scotch, ice, glasses, and water.

The two men remaining in the living room were still mulling over the matter which had been the subject of the Curious Quints' discussion that evening, in the musty third-floor-back room of the Addison Club, with its rows of moldy books and shelves of mangy stuffed birds and forgotten trophies.

The question on the table had been: How did the Song of Songs get into the Bible?

"I am inclined to agree with Barnaby," said George Ko-

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vachy, Lieutenant, Homicide, Bington Police Department. "Barnaby is really a deeper scholar than the rest of us in the Quints. He claims, you know, that he can read Sanskrit and Old Hebrew. He insists that had the Song of Songs not possessed some deep religious significance—metaphorical, of course—it would never have survived the weeding-out process that resulted in the retention of the present Scriptures."

"Bosh," said Snodgrass, the baby-faced instructor in English at Bington University. "The Song of Songs is one of the most beautiful love poems ever written. At least, it is in English—I can't read Hebrew. The point is, it was just too good to be thrown away."

"There is no more triumphant line," broke in Atwater, carrying in a tray, "than 'I am very dark, but comely, O daughters of Jerusalem.' But I think you're both wrong."

"What do you mean?" asked Snodgrass.

"Somebody who was high up in something or other gave a professional scribe a bunch of manuscripts to copy. The Song of Songs was among them, although the man who assigned the copying didn't know it. The Song had been included by mistake. But it went through because that's what the higher-up ordered, and it's been with us ever since. Which would explain the desperate device of the divines labeling it 'The Church takes unto itself a bride.' They had to excuse it somehow."

"That's preposterous," Kovachy objected strongly.

"Nevertheless," insisted Atwater, "it is a possibility which remains to be disproved."

Atwater sank his long lean frame into a rocker, ran a hand through his thatch of white hair, lit a cigar, and puffed with contentment.

"You like cigars, don't you," observed Snodgrass.

"I like *this* cigar," agreed Atwater. "There is a great difference in cigars. I have mine custom-made at Boynton's. You might say it's my personal and special brand."

"You and Koelliker," remarked Kovachy. "He too had a brand of his own made up at Boynton's. El Toro, he called them. He bragged about them, said they were very expensive—penny a puff. But he refused to smoke anything else."

"Anything new on Koelliker?" asked Atwater.

Kovachy frowned.

"I regret to say the answer is no," he replied. "It's been almost four weeks now that the dragnet has been out for

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him all over the country. But no luck. He simply has vanished."

For some years Koelliker had been known in Bington as a man of devious ways. He was mixed up in ward politics, in betting on the horses, and in roving crap and poker games. He was suspected of being a fence for stolen goods. He obviously had more money than he could have obtained by any visible legal means. But now, at long last, the police had managed to get evidence hooking up Koelliker to the numbers racket; the Internal Revenue Service was after him on income taxes; the F.B.I. wanted him in connection with a kidnaping case; and to top it off he was suspected of having been the payoff man in a most unsavory murder. But where was he? Nobody knew.

"The most wanted man in the country," grumbled Kovachy, "and he can't be found. Not a trace of him."

The ashes from Atwater's cigar—engrossed as he was in what Kovachy was saying—fell onto the carpet.

"You were never married, were you?" asked Snodgrass unexpectedly, staring at the ashes.

"No," Atwater said after a moment. "I never married. I've often wondered *why* I never did. I guess it has something to do with an inordinate passion for privacy."

"What do you mean?" Kovachy asked.

"Well, I have liked women, in my day, very much—but not underfoot. There are times—breakfast, for instance. I want my breakfast in solitude. And there is something about an after-dinner cigar that calls for silent cogitation rather than conversation. You know, a man can become quite attached to a cigar."

Snodgrass laughed.

"Wedded to My Lady Nicotine!" he jibed.

But Atwater shrugged off the subject. "Tell me more about Koelliker," he asked Kovachy.

"Not much to tell. Pictures of him in every post office and police station. *And* the newspapers. That square-cut beard and spiked mustache and black hair and eyebrows—"

"Hasn't it occurred to you," interrupted Atwater, "that Koelliker may be older than you think? Suppose he shaved off his beard and mustache and let his dyed hair and eyebrows revert to gray—"

"And the United States is a pretty big country," broke in Snodgrass. "Of course—"

"Yes," anticipated Kovachy, "we've got all places of

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departure covered—planes, trains, buses, ships. I'm a bit surprised," he added, turning to Atwater, "that you would patronize Boynton's tobacco shop knowing that Koelliker had an interest in it—"

"A half interest at least, not to mention being tied up with the bookie in the back room and the upstairs hideaway for the card game. I get around, Lieutenant. Sure, Boynton may be Koelliker's man, but he's also a darned good tobacconist. There's an art to it, you know. Having to do chiefly with humidity. That's why I don't buy my cigars in quantity and keep them in my apartment. I haven't the facilities to maintain the right degree of moisture, so I buy only a box of fifty at a time."

"We are hopeful, however," said Kovachy, reverting to the main topic, "because we're keeping a tail on Koelliker's girl friend. It hasn't been easy, because she's been flitting around like a canary. Yes, I know the simile is appropriate. Bington to New York to Las Vegas to Key West to Banff. We think she's been trying to shake off any shadows because sooner or later, of course, Koelliker is bound to hook up with her. And that's how we'll get him."

The expression on Snodgrass's round face was angelic.

"I saw her once," he said dreamily. "Lily LeMarge. Of course that's not her real name, but it suits her. Fragile, dainty, exquisite—makes you think of cream puffs."

"And hard as obsidian," said Kovachy.

"Nevertheless," continued Snodgrass, "I think you're on the right track. If *I* were Koelliker—"

"Well, Snodgrass," Kovachy cut him off, "it's time you and I went home."

After they left, Atwater sat for a long while—smoking, staring at the ceiling.

Four weeks later Atwater phoned Kovachy.

"Come around to see me tonight, Lieutenant," Atwater said. "I've got something for you."

Kovachy had heard that tone in the Professor's voice before.

"I'll be there," he agreed.

That night, as soon as they were seated with the inevitable Scotch and water on the little table between them, Atwater said abruptly, "Lieutenant, you owe me seventeen dollars and fifty cents."

"For what?"

"For information received."

And Atwater handed Kovachy a slip on which was written, "R.F.D. #2, Beaver, Ohio."

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"Well?" asked Kovachy.

"Koelliker," replied Atwater. "I think that's where you'll find him."

"For God's sake, open up and tell me something!" begged Kovachy.

Atwater leisurely lit a cigar.

"There is a boy in the flat below," the Professor began finally, "who craves to be a detective when he grows up. He is now eleven. His name's Elwood. I employ him on occasion—he charges fifty cents an hour. Portal to portal pay, too. That's what we've come to, with inflation. Hence the seventeen dollars and fifty cents."

"Get to the point, please!"

"The point, as you call it, is very simple. It is, as Snodgrass implied the evening we were last together here, that a man becomes wedded to a cigar. Not to *any* cigar—to his own particular brand, which then becomes indispensible to his comfort.

"In past years there have been times—either I was too busy or something interfered with my going downtown—when I simply phoned Boynton's and had them send me a box of my cigars by mail, parcel post. It occurred to me that other men might do the same. In short, Boynton's might have occasion to send a clerk to the post office to dispatch mail orders. So I employed Elwood to find out.

"It developed I was right. One of Boynton's men usually showed up at the package window of the main post office at about a quarter to twelve in the morning. I suppose the time was convenient because he could then go to lunch.

"Well, I simply had Elwood get in line behind Boynton's man. Naturally I armed Elwood with parcels, too, usually books. I packed off, one at a time, twelve volumes of Tolstoy, eight of Balzac, and quite a few of Voltaire. Some were addressed to Snodgrass, some to a cousin of mine. I told them to hold them for me—some day I'd pick them up.

"Boynton's clerk was not the least bit suspicious of Elwood, so it was easy for Elwood to work up a casual acquaintanceship while they both stood in the line. Boynton's man was not there every day, but almost every day. Sometimes he mailed one parcel, sometimes as many as four. But usually two or three.

"What Boynton's man didn't know was that I had taught Elwood to read upside-down. So when our tobacconist friend laid a parcel on the post-office counter, with the address facing the postal clerk, Elwood,

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crowding at his shoulder, could make it out. Often Elwood got both the name and the address, sometimes just the address. I told him the latter was more important. Elwood also used a small pocket mirror—if he held it just right he could see the reflection of the address on the parcel. Upside-down, of course, but, as I said, I had trained him for that. I told him that the Baker Street Irregulars were past masters at that trick."

Atwater got up, went to a desk, and returned with a folder from which he extracted a single sheet.

"This is the summary of Elwood's report," he said. "In a little more than three weeks he secured a total of thirty-three addresses, and in twenty of the thirty-three he also managed to get the names of the consignees. The question was, of course: was Koelliker among them. For I felt sure that Koelliker had written Boynton to send him some of his El Toros. No use questioning Boynton, of course—not unless we could use the rack or similar instruments of the Inquisition.

"Well, of the thirty-three addresses, nineteen were here in Bington. Where I had names, I checked the telephone book. Where I did not have a name I checked the neighborhood indicated by the address. All the Bington ones seemed cases like my own—just people who found it inconvenient to go downtown. Besides, I thought it most unlikely that Koelliker would hole up in Bington, where he was so well known. So I eliminated these nineteen.

"That left fourteen out-of-town addresses of which I had accompanying names for eight. All these except one were places like New York, Chicago, Dallas, Minneapolis—where a Bington businessman on an extended trip might get hungry for his particular brand of cigar.

"The single exception was the one I gave you. Elwood couldn't get the name, but R.F.D. Number Two, Beaver, Ohio, stuck out like a sore thumb. Beaver is a town of less than two hundred people set in the heart of the big hill country—the most sparsely populated, and the poorest, part of Ohio. I'll bet you can still get a hamburger there for a dime. That anybody in or near Beaver would order expensive cigars by mail was inconceivable. A dollar for a cigar? Why, a native of Beaver, Ohio, would drop dead at the thought!

"Anyhow, Lieutenant—there's the address."

Two nights later Kovachy reported to Atwater. Snodgrass had also dropped in.

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"Yes, he was there," said Kovachy. "Staying with a distant relative named Potts whom he had frightened into taking him in. Why, we didn't even have to ask the folks on R.F.D. Number Two—all we had to do was ask the mailman. Down there when a stranger shows up it's an event."

"I can still hardly believe it," commented Snodgrass. "Here all of you were watching the girl friend and instead he gave himself away through a cigar!"

"There are plenty of women, my boy," Atwater observed, "but there is only one El Toro."

"But what gets me, Professor," put in Kovachy, "is how you happened to think of it."

Atwater chuckled.

"Poetry, Lieutenant," he replied. "I've told you that you should read more of it. Poetry? Well, in this case perhaps 'verse' is the more appropriate word. Remember Kipling's immortal line, Lieutenant? 'And a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke.'"

'Q'

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a *NEW* Nevada story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

The Las Vegas scene again, and a young divorcee—young, scared, eager, beautiful, with "moonbeams for hair," and still pure and innocent, her ideals untarnished. Then along came Frank—a contemporary Prince Charming, a modern knight in a white car—big, strong, perfectly tailored, wealthy. What was there to be frightened of? . . .

SO LONELY, SO LOST, SO FRIGHTENED

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

"Hello," said this man's voice on the telephone. "This is Eddie. Hey, pretty girl, how about a whirl up and down the Strip tonight? Have us a ball. Sinatra's dropping in and out of the spots and with the fellow we'll be with, if we run into Sinatra, who knows, maybe we'll end up buddies. How about it, chickie-dee?"

Well, why not? I had no boy friend. No husband any more, after coming to Nevada. All I had was a job at the Las Vegas daily paper typing up bills and things. Boring. I was tired of it, and tired of me. I had found out I don't like divorced girls. They're torn in two, scared and eager at the same time. And I was one of them.

"Okay," I said. I tried to place this Eddie, especially an Eddie who might know somebody who might be buddies with Sinatra. There had been an Eddie, a long-haired blond with a blond mustache in the newspaper gang I had gone out with one night. Not my date. And vaguely I recalled another Eddie who clerked at the hotel where I had stayed two nights when I first came to Las Vegas. Dark bangs to his eyebrows which intensified the droop of his eyelids. The vague memory of him bothered me a bit. He had always looked at me as if

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he knew more about me than I knew about myself.

"By the way, your date is this fellow with me. Lucky you! You hit the jackpot, kid, a great guy, really great. Loaded. And with good—know what I mean?—good connections around Vegas. Name's Frank. Okay, chickee, pick you up in front of your place in an hour."

Ye gods, I thought, could this Eddie whichever-one-he-is be talking in a roundabout way about Sinatra himself?

Frank, as I waited for the car to pick me up, I was shaking. I really thought you might be Sinatra. Isn't that a laugh?

But it was you, Frank. No laughing matter.

It was the Eddie who worked in the hotel. "Tabby, meet Frank," Eddie said, leaning out the back window of your car.

You were coming around the car to help me in. I felt wooden as I stepped inside, as if maybe I couldn't bend when I tried to sit down. That was the first time I ever rode in a white car like yours, so long and beautiful and expensive. And the first time I ever met a man like you. Your silk and linen suit, so perfectly tailored, the big diamond ring, along with that strong look as if maybe you ran the world by pushing buttons. You even smelled rich, so clean with a faint bite of perfume. I suppose that's the way all rich people with saunas smell.

Over your shoulder you said to Eddie, "Eddie, why didn't you tell me the truth? You said she was the prettiest girl in Vegas." My heart went thud. Like, wow, this fellow is really living up to his name, be frank, tell the bitter truth, he's seen prettier. "But this little Tabby is the prettiest girl in the world. What's Tabby short for, little one? You're not a tabby-cat, you're a princess."

"Tabitha," I said, blushing.

"What would be your pleasure tonight? Which big name star would you especially like to hear?"

"Perhaps you have someone in mind," I said. I didn't want to let on I was so dumb about the Strip, its big hotels and entertainers, that I didn't know which entertainers were in town. Sure, I had been on the Strip a few times. But the fellows I dated just took me into cocktail lounges with no cover charge, so I didn't know much about the big shows.

You said, "Eddie, I've been stashed away in Houston for a long time. Who's playing the Strip tonight?"

Do you remember? One of the stars was Peggy Lee. She really knocks me out. The way

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her voice throbs makes me want my heart to break along with hers—or maybe she just sings the way my heart already felt. At her show I didn't realize I was crying until you took out your handkerchief and patted it on my cheek. Frank, did you figure out how good that would feel to a girl who thought she might really have a broken heart? I mean, was it real? Or a man on the make?

Somewhere along the Strip Eddie and his girl friend faded out. In a kind of blur I saw you whisper to Eddie as we left the Peggy Lee show to catch another show at another hotel. And pretty soon Eddie and his girl were gone. It pleased me, like bubbles of champagne in my mind, because you wanted to be alone with me.

I love your eyes. Bright blue, kind and smiling. Most of the time. You know something crazy, Frank? You have the eyes of a good, loving father. You told me you weren't married, that is, any more. That you never had children. But do you suppose you were meant to be a good father and the trouble was, you never had the chance?

Your nose is a little long and your lips are too thin. If it weren't for your eyes you would have frightened me. You were so big and rich and overpowering, six feet of you towering over my five feet one. And there was a mystery in you that frightened me, like a person in a dark room who hears footsteps that shouldn't be there.

I really was awed, Frank. I felt so young, and you were so grown up. How old were you? Thirty-five? Forty? You never said exactly. I was twenty-two.

When you asked me that first night to go to your hotel with you I wasn't angry. I didn't go, but I wasn't mad. I cried, sure. But it made me face facts. I had been wishing you were my father. Then, when you asked me that, it was clear you were a man and I was a woman, and I might as well stop wishing for a father.

To make up for thinking that way, as I left your car I took your face between my hands, looked into your wise eyes and kissed you. "You're really a good man," I said. Wasn't that a dumb thing to say? Right after what you'd asked me? But I meant it. "You're such a good man," I said. Then I ran into the cottage apartment where I lived.

I peeked through the curtain of the front window without turning on the lights. You sat out there in your car a long time. I could see the light of your cigar. Once you got out

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and started toward my door.

But you turned around, got back in your car and drove away. "Goodbye," I whispered. One more blind date struck out. Bye-bye. Fellows on blind dates usually don't like girls who kiss and run.

You know why I ran? Not because I didn't like you. It was because of the way my grandmother, who raised me, taught me. I was kind of an orphan, my folks divorced, and then my mother died and my father sort of disappeared. Anyway, my grandmother said keep yourself pure for marriage, that's what God wants. I believed her. I still do. But when marriage goes wrong and one's mind and emotions feel like they've been operated on, it's harder to remember what one believes, or should believe.

So that night, after you drove away, I wished I knew which hotel you were in. So I could telephone you and tell you to come back.

"Hello, little Tabby," you said. I had just come out of the newspaper office after work, wondering whether to get a hamburger and a milk shake someplace or go home first and take a shower. It was midsummer in Vegas, and midsummer in Vegas is like sitting on a hot stove in a dry frying pan.

You were in your big white car, calling to me. I ran to you as if you were Santa Claus and I was about five years old. "I never thought I'd see you again," I said.

You chuckled. "Funny," you said. "*I* knew I would see *you* again. If I lived. Get in the car, sweetheart. You look tired. Let's go have dinner."

"Oh, please, I need to shower and change first!" What would I wear—my white pants suit?—no, maybe that new long pale-blue lace, with the ribbon around the waist.

Naturally you came in my apartment while I changed—you couldn't sit out there in the heat. So you waited in my living room, flipping through magazines. I locked the door of my bathroom, very softly so you wouldn't hear. But you never moved. Crazy thing, I was disappointed you didn't even move.

I wore the long pale-blue dress and pinned up my hair because I thought it made me look older. I was always running into trouble at the clubs; they were afraid I was too young to come in. I bleach my hair, I told you that a long time ago. And you said, "I don't want to hear about it. All I want is to believe you have moonbeams for hair." Well, with that kind of hair and blue

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eyes—no, actually they're violet—and being small, I guess—

You took a deep breath when I came out of the bedroom ready to go. You stood up, put your hands on my shoulders, bent down, and kissed my forehead. "Honey, you're not real. Wherever we go tonight, they'll think I'm bringing my baby-dollie with me."

Where did we go that night? Dinner, yes. Yes, I remember. In an elegant quiet room with quiet dreamy couples scattered around it. That kind of place. I knew you had to be somebody special to know about a place like that in Vegas when all most people know about are the loud, slot-machine hotel kind.

Later we went to the big clubs, all of them I think. It made me giggle, how the head waiters bowed so low and smiled and led us to special tables beside the dance floor. And I felt so important to be with you when executive-looking men came to our tables saying things like, "Good to have you back in Vegas. Hope you stay with us." And you saying, yes, good, but you'd be back and forth. I tried to worry about that "back and forth," but giggles bubbled out of me all the time as if they were champagne and I was a glass.

As we drove away from the last club, the bubbles stopped. Nothing was left in the glass except a sad worry that you and the whole evening were not real, only a dream. I told you that, that night. But you said it would last forever, it wasn't a dream, it was the only real thing in your life.

Later, when you insisted I quit my job, I asked what had been on my mind all along. "You mean, we're going to get married?" It was pretty embarrassing. I mean, even with a man I knew as well as you, it should be the man asking the girl.

"As soon as possible," you said. "Right now I'm under heavy pressure. Business. And I'm in a business where pressure isn't—good. At this stage in my affairs it's better for you to be involved as little as possible. Tabby, with a man like me, marriage takes time and caution."

"What kind of business are you in?" I asked.

"We won't talk about it now," you said. "Let me do the worrying and you do the playing. Little girls with moonbeam hair and violet eyes shouldn't bother about a man's business troubles. Then, if anybody asks questions, you won't know any answers."

I knew you were doing the

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worrying, your face had become so strained. It didn't ease up when you said we were going on a vacation, to Acapulco; your face became even more tight and your eyes more watchful. So I knew we were leaving because of something frightening about your business. But I never asked about it, not even when you had me fly alone from Las Vegas one early morning to Los Angeles, and from there to Acapulco. Not even after those long hours of waiting for you in the Acapulco airport.

But then you came and everything was wonderful. Except, it wasn't a vacation. You leased a house and paid a year's rent in advance.

Acapulco was so beautiful, so soothing that I forgot to worry. Soft guitars, tropical birds singing, flowers everywhere. The Mexican people were so warm, loving, yet so exotic, their voices rising and falling in the mysterious gaiety of a foreign language.

And this house you rented, high-ceilinged with wide windows and doors facing the sea. White walls, lime-colored drapes with blue-green flowers floating on them. The furniture white and gold, hand-carved. Goatskin rugs scattered over the tiled floors for me to pad over with my bare, manicured feet. Before I went to Mexico I never dreamed manicurists came to houses just to do fingernails and toenails. A silly thing, but it made me feel so rich and beautiful, so cared for.

Best of all was good strong Mamacita who ran the house, bossed her two daughters and the gardener, and taught me Spanish. I depended so much on Mamacita, especially the times you went away on business, back to Las Vegas or wherever.

Which place did you go to this last time, Frank? The Bahamas, New York, or just out on some God-forsaken nowhere road? Where did these terrible things happen to you?

Even though this last time you were away longer than usual, I wasn't frightened until those men came to our house. Two of them. One blond, one medium, but both with dark faces. Not dark from being tanned in the sun. Dark from something deep inside.

I was frightened the moment they stepped into our living room, even though I didn't yet know how they shoved past Mamacita at the entrance door. The gardener had been working out front and they gave him a hundred pesos to unlock the street gate—Mamacita made him admit it later. She followed the two men

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and stood in the door of the living room, her big brown eyes flashing and her jaw set.

When they said they were your friends and asked to see you, I invited them to sit down and sent Mamacita for fruit juice. She tossed her head and when she came back, one of her daughters was with her and I was vaguely aware that now the gardener was trimming shrubs with his machete just outside the open French doors.

I told those men the truth. That I didn't know where you were, that you never told me, never wrote letters. That you said you would be back within the month, but now the month was up.

The way they watched me, still and probing, reminded me of you, Frank. Sometimes you looked like that in Las Vegas when you met your business friends. Only their eyes were flatter, deader than yours ever were. Frank, I was scared to death.

Finally they said the papers they had for you to sign could wait until you returned. "But I don't know when he will be back!" I said. I sounded desperate because I was desperate. "Perhaps—perhaps he's looking for you somewhere in the States. If he needs to sign papers, perhaps he's up there waiting for you."

Their eyes flicked over me. "Waiting for us?"

"In Vegas, or somewhere. Just waiting while you're here looking for him. He may wait until you come. Only I hope not, he's been gone such a long time already. I'm—I'm anxious about him."

They smiled, as if something funny had suddenly struck them. "Don't worry, little lady," one of them said. "We'll send a wire to our associates so he won't need to wait any longer. One of them will see that he gets the papers."

They thanked me and left, Mamacita bouncing angrily behind them to the outside gate and then locking it with a big flourish.

When she returned to the house I ran to her, put my arms around her, and cried, "Mamacita, *tengo miedo, tengo miedo!* I have fear, I have fear for my Senor."

"*Si, si,* poor little Senorita. Don't have fear, Mamacita will take care of you. Did not the Senor tell me to?"

She suddenly left off patting my back and vanished toward the kitchen. "One little moment, Senorita," she called over her shoulder.

She returned holding a long thin kitchen knife, polished down by use until it was almost a stiletto. She waved it in a

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circle, then gave a sudden jab through the circle. "This, in case of thieves. Or if those wicked men come back and make trouble." She pulled out a drawer in the white-and-gold cabinet beneath the framed mirror in the entrance hall. "Look, Senorita, remember it is here. In case I should not be near. The knife is here." She nodded with satisfaction and walked off about her work, her lovely broad hips swaying.

I could hear her flaying the gardener with fierce words because he was a scoundrel and took money to open the gate; no need to confess to the priest for that evil deed, she would take it out of his hide. Her daughters, all ears, were idling in the background; she ordered them back to work. Everything was normal once more and I tried to laugh, pretending what had happened was only funny. Like some crazy movie with make-believe villains. But the laugh stuck in my throat.

Frank, you were away so long that the money you left gave out. There was no worry about the house, the rent was paid. The manicurist, the hairdresser, the shopping, they were easy to drop—I hadn't had those things before. But the servants' salaries, the food to buy for all of us, that couldn't be dropped.

Finally the gardener threatened me with the police about his salary. So Mamacita threatened him and ran him off. She patted me a lot and told me again and again not to have fear, not to have anxiety. But she was anxious, too. Actually I think more for me than for herself. Mamacita belonged in Mexico. I didn't.

Finally she sent her daughters off to other jobs. And at last Mamacita herself left. Once or twice a week she came back to bring me tortillas and beans. I ate tortillas and beans for three months. Not that I'm complaining, I like tortillas and beans—Mexicans eat that way all the time. And there were papayas and bananas and sweet lemons in our garden. I could even have been content if I hadn't kept thinking about those two men. That if they found you, they meant to hurt you. Or worse.

I don't like to say it, Frank, but it's true: alone that way I began to feel clean again. Almost as I used to feel when I was a small girl in my grandmother's house. Often I forgot to think, I'm in love with a racketeer, maybe a criminal. How did someone named Tabitha and raised by her grandmother get mixed up in this?

Six months passed and still

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you didn't come. It was embarrassing, having the beautiful house and clothes, looking rich, and eating Mamacita's tortillas and beans. So I sold my watch, my camera, some of my clothes. I kept my beautiful diamond ring; you said it was our engagement ring.

Antonio bought the camera. He heard about it through one of Mamacita's daughters. He didn't pay much, only 150 pesos, but it was more than he could afford. With that $12 plus the money I hadn't spent from the other things I sold, I planned to buy a bus ticket to the Border. Back in the States I could find a job. I would leave a letter for you, telling you what I was doing.

One night I packed a small bag, leaving most of my things behind in the hope I would be back. Then early in the morning I left the house and walked down to the locked entrance gate. As I put the key in the lock, Antonio was reaching for the chain which rang the black iron bell above the gate.

"*Buenos dias*, Senorita," he said. Like Mamacita, Antonio knew only Spanish, but by this time I was fairly fluent in it. "Such a beautiful morning, so pretty here, are you leaving, Senorita?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

"My heart is grieved," he said, his big brown eyes sad. He was a very handsome boy, just my age he told me later. Even in cotton work clothes he was handsome. Tall for a Mexican, with smooth healthy brown skin, an oval face with strong features. "Acapulco will lose its beauty when you leave." That's the way Mexicans talk; it sounds lovely even when they don't mean it. "Senorita, I came today to fix your garden. The mother of my friend, the one you call Mamacita, tells me your gardener has left, the garden is dry, the weeds grow. I will fix it."

"You're very kind. But I have no money. I couldn't pay the other gardener, that's why he is angry with me. I have only enough money to buy a ticket to the Border. Back to my own country."

A smile flashed and he leaned eagerly toward me. "This could be your country, Senorita. It's true, it is possible. I will arrange it with the mother of my friend, it will be very nice, very respectable. I will marry you, Senorita."

Frank, nothing in me wanted to marry this handsome sweet boy. I knew I would never marry him. Or anybody but you. That isn't why I began to cry. It was because I was so lonely, so lost, so frightened. It was comforting to have some-

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one want to take care of me.

Antonio reached through the iron bars of the gate, took the key from my hand, and unlocked it. He followed me to the tiled garden seat and started to put his arms around me. I shook my head and said, "No. *Siempre no.* Always no. No, no, no." He shook me, gently, and said, "Please, Senorita, I understand, say no more. Be at peace."

He stood aside, placed his hands on his hips, smiled, and tossed his head toward the shaggy dry garden. "I will make it pretty again. You stay. Perhaps—perhaps the Senor will come soon, it's better you wait to see. What if he comes tomorrow? Or next week? If he does not, one can always leave. Senorita, you like chili rellenos, my sister is making chili rellenos today, too many for her family, she give me some, you like them?"

Frank, I was used to being dependent on you. Besides, I'll face it, I'm a dependent person. So it was easy to let Antonio help me. A mirage of safety.

Antonio, I discovered, had a stall in one of the markets. He made beautiful leather sandals, the leather soft and cured, more delicate than most Mexican sandals. He brought me a pair. I couldn't hurt his feelings, could I, by not wearing them?

He was the businessman for his family. His relatives brought their craft work to him to sell—serapes, blankets, pottery, all kinds of things. Actually, even though he was young, the relatives looked on him as their family head because he was so bright and ambitious. He was studying books on mathematics, grammar, and science.

"Someday, Senorita, I will make myself into an educated gentleman," he told me. "You'll see. Like I change stiff leather into a soft beautiful shoe. My family will be proud of me then." He laughed, so natural in the pleasure of what he could become that it didn't sound egotistical. He didn't say it, but I saw it in his eyes: You will be proud of me, too, Senorita.

As head of his family he could demand assistance from relatives to watch the market stall when he wanted to be away. At those times he made my garden beautiful again. On those days, too, following him shadowlike, one or another shy scrawny little girl of twelve or so would accompany him. A cousin, or a niece, some relative. With rapid Spanish and stern eye he would command the child and off she would scurry to the back patio, gather up pail and mop and clean the floors, or flip a cloth to move

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the dust from one spot to another.

I protested. I said I had been doing the housework, I was used to work. But I was afraid to protest too much for fear Antonio and the little girls would stop coming.

But when the Mariachi band began to serenade me in the dark predawn morning I knew that all this had to stop, that I must take the bus to the Border. Forget you. Find a job. Forget both you and Antonio.

When I woke from sleep and heard the haunting, lilting song rising from the street outside the garden wall, for the first few minutes I didn't realize what it was. I actually thought I had died and gone to Paradise. But then I noticed my heart pounding, and dead hearts don't pound. Then I wondered if you were dead. That somehow your spirit had sent the Mariachis to tell me that.

But of course Antonio had sent them. He tried to be subtle about it when he came to work in the garden. "Did you sleep well, Senorita?" he asked casually. But his eyes, anxious and shy, gave him away.

"No," I said. "Beautiful music woke me. I thought I had died."

He was stricken. "You were frightened, Senorita Tabby?"

"Yes. Very frightened. Because you are too kind to me and like me too much. The Senor is not going to return. So now I must leave. Tomorrow. This is definite."

So last night I packed my little bag again, ready to leave this morning.

Last night Antonio's large family, along with Mamacita and his relatives, made a fiesta for me. They came weighed down with pots, platters, baskets of food—enchiladas, tamales, chili rellenos, beans, tortillas—and I furnished papayas and bananas. All of us sang and laughed, someone had a guitar. As they left, they wept, embraced me, told me to go with God and to return quickly. Everyone, that is, except Antonio. He wouldn't tell me goodbye. Just bowed and left.

Later, in the dark early morning, the Mariachis came again.

I went out on the bedroom balcony in this lovely filmy robe you bought me. The moon was out, and the street light played tangle-fingers with the leaves of the trees lining the sidewalk, scattering light and shadows over the upturned faces of the musicians. When they saw me on the balcony their voices became softer, more yearning.

I glimpsed Antonio across the street, standing in the

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shadows, watching to see if I came out to the balcony. He moved from the shadows, into the middle of the street, looking up, taut, leaning forward as if he would walk along his gaze all the way up to me.

I should have gone back inside quickly. Quickly. Antonio was such a nice boy, so sweet. An honorable boy, Frank.

But I didn't. I slipped to my knees by the iron railing of the balcony, weeping, saying, "Oh, Antonio, I'm so lonely, so weak, so lost!"

He ran to one of the musicians, sprang like a cat to his shoulders, and from there to the top of the wall. He grasped the iron spikes on the wall to steady himself, then jumped down into the courtyard. He came beneath the balcony, saying he loved me, he would die for me, please, Senorita, we'll be married.

Then, suddenly, he was on the balcony beside me, murmuring words like honey that blended with the music in the street.

That's all there was to it, Frank. No matter what you thought. That's all. A weak frightened girl kneeling on a balcony and listening to a boy tell her how much he loved her.

We didn't hear the taxi drive up or notice its lights. But we heard the gate open, heard you speak to the driver who carried your bags. I sprang up. All I thought of was, you were back. You hadn't died, you hadn't forgotten me, you were here!

I cried out, "Frank, darling!"

You looked up. I could see your every feature, the moonlight was so bright. Your face terrified me. Partly because you were shockingly thin, your cheeks sunken. But mostly because of the cold rage on your face. "You couldn't wait," you said quietly, dangerously. The musicians had stopped playing and in the still night your cold voice slipped into me like a stiletto blade.

Only then I remembered Antonio beside me. "No, Frank, don't think that! The music, it made me cry. Antonio heard me crying because you were gone and I was afraid you were dead." I thought frantically, what can I say to make him believe me? I said, "Antonio is only a servant."

"Your maid, perhaps?" you said.

Antonio climbed over the balcony railing and dropped lightly into the courtyard. "Senor, a thousand pardons." You didn't understand Spanish, so this is what he said, "A thousand pardons. Not to you, but to the little Senorita whose

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heart is broken. She weeps for you, not for me. If I had a thousand lives I would give them all if she would but weep for me like that one little hour. So have anger at me, I'm the one with blame."

He raised his voice and called to the musicians, "Go, go! No more music tonight. This is private."

Without taking your eyes off him you paid the taxi driver, waved him away. The gate clanged shut. The lights of the taxi shot up the street.

The night became taut, as though the air was sucked out of it. Every sound hurt the nerves—the feet of the musicians as they shuffled away, the frogs croaking in the fountain's pool, the insects chirping, the breathing of the three of us, the drumming of my heart. It was mesmerizing. I felt outside of everything that was happening, something like when I was a child lying on my stomach on the ground watching ants do funny ant things.

You men stood still, staring at each other. Finally I choked out, "Antonio's the gardener. The only one left."

You said softly, "And the flower is in the house? Upstairs?"

I left the balcony, ran through the bedroom, down the stairs to the front door, drew the bolt, ran to you reaching blindly, like an exhausted swimmer struggling for shore. You held me off, a queer, awkward thing, struggling to touch you, my filmy robe fluttering like a moth.

Finally I gave up and stood back, begging for answers, "Frank, where were you? Why didn't you come back? Please, tell me what happened."

"Troubles. From good friends," you said. "I recovered from them in the hospital. One of the get-well cards read, 'This time the hospital, next time the morgue.' What kind of cards did you want to send to me, Tabitha? 'Having a wonderful time, glad you're not here'? And perhaps this Mexican Romeo is a welcome-home present?"

You sighed then, as though you were tired of everything, too tired even for anger. "Oh, well," you said. "One way or another, I suppose I deserve it." You started toward the house. I followed. You stopped, looked back with a bitter smile, and pointed at Antonio. "Is your friend coming, too?"

Antonio didn't understand English. But the way you looked at him, so contemptuous, he must have believed it a terrible insult to his masculine pride, to his machismo. And Frank, I believe he loved me,

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truly loved me. He ran at you, grabbed you, threw you to the paved yard. I was shocked when you didn't throw him aside, you were always so big and strong. Later I knew why—when I saw the long scars, the surgeon's stitches on your throat and chest, that had not yet healed.

Antonio was young and healthy. He clutched your throat, suffocating you. Once you rolled him over and were on top, banging his head on the paving stones. Then you were down again and his fingers were at your throat again. I threw myself on him, pulled his hair, raked my fingernails across his face, screaming in Spanish, "Quitate! Leave my man alone! I love him!"

For all the attention he paid I could have been a dream drifting in the night. The crack of your head on the stones came again and again. Your breathing rasped and snuffled.

Then I remembered Mamacita's knife—in the hall cabinet, ready in case of trouble. I ran into the hall, felt in the drawer. For one terrible lost moment in which I saw you dead before I could help, I couldn't find it. Then I did, at the back of the drawer.

I ran back. Antonio still clutched your throat, banging your head. A dark streak poured from your neck. I know now an unhealed scar had burst open.

Antonio's back was to me. For a crazy confused instant I tried to decide on which side was his heart. Then, with all my force, I struck the slim sharp blade into his back.

Please, Frank, please talk. Please breath again. Help me. I don't know what to do. I never killed anyone before. Should I call the police tonight? Or wait until daylight? Should the police see everything just as it is? Two dead men in my front patio and me with blood all over from pulling Antonio off you. When I rolled him away, he fell on his back and the knife sank deeper. He gasped once. And that was all.

I never wanted anything like this to happen. How do terrible things happen to people who don't want them? How can a love story go so wrong?

Please, Frank, wake up and tell me, tell me.

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continuing the **NEW** series of police procedurals by

LAWRENCE TREAT

It was a typical case—for Inspector Mitch Taylor of Homicide, that is. By accident Mitch spotted a stranger in the train doing something strange with his hands, and this tied in with something strange about a murder that happened a year and a half ago and was still unsolved. So Mitch started adding up two and two—in fact, at one point Mitch felt "like he was the mastermind, kind of like Sherlock Holmes sitting in an armchair and doping everything out." But like somebody once said: "What you start out with isn't always what you end up with"...

G AS IN GARROTE

by LAWRENCE TREAT

Somebody once said that what you start out with isn't always what you end up with. And whoever said it, Inspector Mitch Taylor, Homicide, wasn't the guy to second-guess him.

Take, for instance, the Hubbard case, which was pretty much the last thing Mitch was thinking of when he got on the train at Dumont. He'd gone up there earlier in the day to make an identification, and what with this and with that he'd hung around until evening.

The Dumont Chief of Police had one of his men drive Mitch down to the railroad station. They were a little ahead of time and Mitch and this cop—his name was Rudolph, he was young and they got along pretty good—sat there in the parking lot jawing about nothing in particular until the train showed up. Then Mitch had to make a run for it.

It was a two-car train, and he went into the nonsmoker and picked a seat in the middle of the car. At first he didn't

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recognize the thin guy with the long neck as the same one that had parked a yellow Cadillac right in front of a hydrant just a few hours ago.

Matter of fact, Mitch had other things on his mind—like the way the wheels bumped over the joints of the rails, and the way the windows hadn't been cleaned in maybe a couple of months, and how the shades didn't work. Thinking of stuff like that it struck Mitch that his kid Joey had never ridden on a train and maybe never would. And had never even seen a steam locomotive. He'd been in plenty of buses, and once, the time they'd all gone to New York to see Amy's family, the kid had been on a plane.

With that Mitch got to wondering what there was about a train. The thing was, he decided, that you could walk up and down, you could go to the end of the car for a drink of water, or else you could go on up to the smoker and then come back. It wasn't exactly exercise, but at least you could move around, and there was always the chance you'd spot somebody friendly and could sit down with him for a while.

With that in mind Mitch got up and went to the water cooler, which turned out to be empty. Seeing as how there were no paper cups anyhow, it didn't make much difference either way. And so, with nothing else to do, Mitch looked around, which was when he noticed this guy with the long thin neck.

He was tying knots, over and over again, and his hands kept twitching. Maybe he was just the nervous type and had to do something with his hands, or maybe this was a hobby of his and he was kind of an expert. Because he kept tying these knots and then pulling them apart, and anything that had to do with knots connected up with the Hubbard case, which was still open after a year and a half.

What had happened was, this old lady, her name was Hubbard and for some reason Lieutenant Decker, Chief of Homicide, kept calling her Old Mother Hubbard even though she was nobody's mother and just had an assortment of nephews and nieces. Anyhow, she was 75 or so and she lived all alone with a collection of miniature paintings and a dog. She had a whole bunch of these miniatures and they were worth plenty, but nobody knew how much or how many of them there were, because they'd never been counted or listed. Her heirs, there were seven or eight of them, they all claimed that some of the stuff was

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missing, but they didn't know which ones and couldn't describe them or even agree on who'd painted them. Somebody famours, they said, and let it go at that.

According to the Medical Examiner, Mother Hubbard had been strangled around 6 P.M. on that particular Wednesday in April. Whoever had done it had used a green nylon pull-cord that was left over from some decorating job, and the noose was an unusual one, and so were a couple of knots in the cord. One of them had got her square on the Adam's apple and had busted the cartilage.

Mitch was a little mixed up on the knot stuff, but Lieutenant Decker had gotten a Navy guy to give the Homicide Squad the dope on rope tying, with the idea that maybe they'd come across the same kind of knot and could tie it in with the case. There was, for instance, an English diamond knot and a sheepshank, but what they looked like Mitch didn't know and never would. Still, when you saw a guy sitting there and playing with knots, you kind of wondered.

That was about all Mitch could do, of course, except follow him when the train got to the city. What with everybody going the same way out to the street it was no trick to tail the guy. He was carrying his bag, and all Mitch had to do was walk a little faster than usual and watch what he did, which was go out to the taxi line and get a cab. Mitch jotted down the number of the license plate, then went home.

After the usual briefing at headquarters the next morning —just a bunch of minor cases like you handle pretty much all year round—Mitch sat down at his desk, picked up the phone, and called the cab company. He wanted to know who'd been at the wheel of 18-41-D last night and had picked somebody up at the station at a certain time. The cabby wasn't in but his report was, and it told Mitch that the guy he was interested in had gone from the Union Station to 2357 North Post. About an hour later Mitch was up there.

It turned out to be a stucco house in a decent enough neighborhood, and it was a cinch to go down to the corner grocer's and ask who lived at 2357. The clerk let out that a guy named Gordon Phillips lived there and lived pretty good, judging by the stuff he bought.

With that under his hat Mitch went up to 2357 and rang the bell. The dame who answered was a baby-faced blonde with her hair up in

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curlers. When Mitch identified himself she kind of sucked in her breath like she was expecting him to tell her that her husband was dead, his insurance had been canceled, and the bank was taking over the house for nonpayment of the mortgage, and she'd known all along that exactly that was going to happen.

Mitch made it easy for her. "Nothing to worry about," he said. "Somebody got mugged at the Union Station last night and we want to know if your husband saw anything. We need witnesses."

"Oh!" she said. She didn't ask how come Mitch knew her husband had been at the station or how he'd got his name. "You scared me so. A policeman!"

"You ought to feel that when an officer comes around he's here to help you," Mitch said. It was what the new breed of cop was supposed to say. Mitch wasn't exactly new breed, or old breed either, and he had no particular use for public relations stuff; but he always needed to get along with people. Besides, he was a lot better off if people liked cops than if they didn't. So he'd been handing out this line long before anybody decided you ought to.

"Yes," she said. "But Gordon—my husband—he didn't mention anything, so I guess—"

"Is he home?" Mitch said, edging forward a little and getting enough of a look inside to decide the Phillipses were doing all right for themselves. Nothing fancy, but you could tell they'd paid good dough for that furniture inside. "Maybe I'd better talk to him," Mitch said. "Is he here?"

"Not now," she said. "He went to the shop. I'm sure you can find him there."

"Which is?"

"He runs The Knot Shop," she said. "Knot, with a K. The kind you tie."

"Sure," Mitch said, wondering whether his bright idea, that because a guy ties fancy knots he has to be the one that strangled Old Mother Hubbard, was going down the drain.

Anyhow, he got the address and the Phillips dame fidgeted with her curlers and stared at Mitch like now it was time for him to do a jig and then come out with a singing telegram or something. So he said, "Well, thanks. Your name is—"

"He calls me Twinky," she said. "Because I—well, because—"

"Yeah," Mitch said, like he knew what she was talking about.

The Knot Shop was a hole in the wall on Hemings Avenue, and the dame in there chirped

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at him and told him Mr. Phillips was out, he'd be back later on, she didn't know exactly when. It seemed that her name was Bess Davis and she was kind of lonesome; she hadn't had a customer all morning.

Mitch let her tongue wag on. He didn't know what he was after, or even if he was after anything; but in the back of his mind he kept asking himself how this Phillips guy could pay his rent and pay this dame's salary and support a wife besides, all on the proceeds of a store that sold a few knots and not much else. Because about all they had here was a hunk of pottery for maybe putting fruit in, and a selection of colored strings, cords, ribbons, and fancy twine with tricky knots in them or else tied so they ran double or triple. They were made to sell for bracelets or necklaces or anything else you wanted to do with them, and from the look around here The Knot Shop might make five or ten bucks' worth of sales a day.

Still, you never knew, and here the Davis female was saying her boss had just come back from a selling trip. Mitch managed to ask what he was selling and who bought knots, and then this Bess Davis was off and running.

From what she said it seemed that Gordon Phillips was maybe the world's leading authority on knots. He'd founded the National Knot Club and he'd invented a couple of knots that were named after him. There was the Gordon Hitch and the Half-Gordon Knot, and the Gordon Knot, besides. Mitch said he thought he'd heard about them in school, and Bess laughed and said he must be thinking of the Gordian knot, but that was a different one; it was such a tough knot that they'd had to cut it with a sword.

Mitch remembered now. "A guy named Alexander cut it," he said, "and made himself famous. Alexander the Great!"

Bess laughed again and went on with what a whiz this Phillips was with knots. He'd been hipped on them ever since he was a kid; he used to go to bed with a piece of string and he'd work on his knots there in the dark.

Mitch was getting pretty tired of hearing about knots and how good this guy was at tying them; then Phillips finally came in and Mitch got a good look at him. He was just as thin and his neck was just as long as it had been on the train, and his hands still had that habit of twitching.

Anyhow, Mitch identified himself and handed out the line about a mugging at the station

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and had Phillips witnessed it. Only Phillips caught on fast that there was something more behind the questions.

"What makes you think I was there?" he asked.

"Guy recognized you."

Phillips didn't fall for that. "Who?" he demanded.

"Look," Mitch said. "All I want to know is, did you see it happen? A short stocky guy grabbed a purse and we think maybe we got him, only the point is to identify. That's what I'm here for, to find out if you saw the thing happen."

"I did not," Phillips said. "I saw nothing. Furthermore, I've been out of town for a couple of weeks and I have a lot of work to catch up on. So—"

"Selling trip?" Mitch asked casually.

"What I did," Phillips said, "is not police business."

"Sure," Mitch said. "Only this knot stuff, it's sort of unusual, and I guess I got a habit of asking questions."

"And I," Phillips said, "got a habit of not answering them. Unless, of course, there's some other point to this."

"Nothing much," Mitch said. "Except—what was Twinky so worried about?"

Phillips opened his mouth like he was going to snap something out, then he changed his mind and glared. When that didn't get him anywheres, he turned around, went to the rear of the shop, and yanked at a curtain. Mitch got a glimpse of a desk crammed into the tiny work space back there, and then the curtain dropped down.

"He's inclined to be high-strung," the Davis female said apologetically. "He's always been that way."

Back at headquarters Mitch went into Lieutenant Decker's little cubbyhole of an office and told him what he'd done. Decker listened and said, "Oh, brother!" a couple of times, which meant he was impressed. When Mitch finished, Decker turned around in his chair and made it squeak a little.

"At the time Old Mother Hubbard was killed," he said, "we had no suspects and nobody who knew about knot tying. And now, a year and a half later, nobody can be expected to remember where they were at six o'clock on that particular evening. They won't even have to give an alibi. About all we can do is to find a motive or else wait for one of those miniatures to turn up. Otherwise—"

"If the motive was robbery," Mitch said, "on account those miniatures were worth a lot of dough—"

"They were," Decker said, "and are."

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"Then the burglar would wait a year before trying to sell them. They usually wait a year and then think it's safe."

"You say this Phillips got on at Dumont?" Decker said.

"I didn't see him get on," Mitch said, "but I spotted him earlier in the day parking a big new Cadillac. I figured maybe he's got some kind of a racket going in Dumont and that's where his dough comes from."

"I better phone and see what they know about him," Decker said.

He picked up the phone and put his call through to the Dumont Chief of Police. And like Decker always did, being Chief of Homicide here in a big city and talking to a small-town cop, Decker buttered him up a little and then asked his question. And drew a blank. The Dumont Chief didn't know anybody named Phillips, didn't know anybody with a long neck who tied knots, and didn't know anybody in the knot business.

Decker put the phone down and turned around real slow, listening to the squeak of his chair. "You say his wife seemed scared when she found out you were a police officer?"

Mitch nodded. "Like she had the idea he was due for trouble, and this was it."

"Keep after him," Decker said. "Find out who knows him, what people think of him, and where he gets his dough."

"Sure," Mitch said.

This was the kind of assignment he liked. Nothing definite. Poke around, chew the rag with a few people. No hurry, no pressure. Just pick up whatever you could.

It was no trick to find out from the neighbors that Phillips spent about half his time away from home. On business of some kind. They didn't know exactly what. Selling, they thought. But the idea that he was operating some kind of racket seemed to shock people. Phillips was the quiet, law-abiding type.

A check with the credit bureau was negative. A few years ago he'd had some debts, but now he paid his bills promptly and didn't have to borrow. It looked as if he'd come into money somewhere along the line, but his bank was pretty sure he had no big investments and they didn't think he owned any stocks or bonds.

The next thing Mitch turned up was Phillips' cousin, Terry Quint, and between Quint and this Davis female Mitch got himself an earful.

Quint was a big loudmouth who sold chinaware and had been brought up with Phillips

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and hated his guts. According to Quint, Phillips was mean, sneaky, and underhanded, and never came out with things.

"He's tricky," Quint said. "You never know what he's thinking, except he's thinking all the time and trying to tie you up in knots." And Quint let out a laugh you could hear over on the next block.

"What does he live on?" Mitch asked.

"Ask him," Quint said. "Until a couple of years ago he and his wife just about made out. Then something happened, and I don't know what. He didn't inherit anything, so how did he get his dough?"

"That's what I'm asking you," Mitch said.

"I'd like to know, too," Quint said. "If he had a little more moxie I'd say he was robbing banks. Because he goes away for the first half of every month, regular, and comes back loaded. I don't know what he does, and neither does Twinky. And between you and me she's worried sick."

"Maybe he goes on a selling trip," Mitch said.

"Knots?" Quint said. "Nuts."

"You got me," Mitch said. "Look, ever hear of the Hubbard murder case and some miniatures?"

"Hubbard?" Quint said. "I got a customer named Hubbard, up in Columbus, but they don't go in for miniatures. They buy big stuff."

When you added it all up, Quint didn't have much to tell, except that when you listened to him and then listened to the Davis female, they sounded like they were talking about two different people. Still, that could happen and often does. And both of them could be right.

Mitch talked it over with Lieutenant Decker, who went along with Mitch's idea that he was onto something.

"Maybe I ought to go back to Dumont," Mitch said. "Even if the Chief up there never heard of him I can ask around. On account you never know."

"Try it," Decker said, and the next day Mitch took the train to Dumont.

They still ran only a couple of cars and it was a tossup which car needed cleaning the most. And like last time there were only a few passengers, which meant Mitch had to sit alone, with nothing much to do except listen to the wheels. Which you'd go nuts doing if you listened too hard.

After stopping at all the places that were big enough to have a drugstore, the train finally made it to Dumont. There Mitch got off and took a

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cab. On the way this cabby shot off his mouth about how people didn't use cabs much any more, they all had their own cars and then they complained about taxi fares, and which was more expensive, huh? Own your own car or pay a buck or two for a cab? And in a cab you didn't even have to drive. People were dopes, about all they ever did was complain. And vote the wrong way, too.

Mitch didn't go into which was the right way and which the wrong way, because when you argue politics all it gets you is making somebody sore at you, and what for? Politics is something to crab about only with people who are going to agree with you.

Anyhow, Mitch went into the headquarters building, where there was a big room with a long counter. A female cop in a blue, breasty uniform was holding down the fort as a kind of dispatcher. The Chief wasn't around, which was okay with Mitch. He never got along with the brass, except maybe Decker, and even then he had to be careful. So Mitch identified himself and asked if Rudolph was around. It seemed he was out on patrol, so this female called Rudolph and told him to come on back to headquarters, an out-of-town officer wanted to see him.

Mitch didn't tell Rudolph right off what this was about, on account Mitch didn't want this female cop to get a load of what was none of her business anyhow. He just told Rudolph he'd like to ride around with him, there were a couple of things to talk over. Then, when they were sitting in the police cruiser, Mitch came out with it.

"I'm trying to locate a guy named Phillips," he said. "Gordon Phillips. The Chief said he didn't know anything about him, but—well, you know Chiefs."

From the way Rudolph grinned you could tell he didn't think much of the Dumont Chief. But all Rudolph said, real slow and cranking up a few wheels inside the bony part of his head, was, "Gordon Phillips, huh? What does he look like?"

"About a hundred and forty pounds," Mitch said, "and just under six feet. Blue eyes, high thin nose, and a long neck. Nervous type, likes to have a string in his hands and make knots with it."

"Sounds like you're talking about Phillip Gordon."

"Must be the same guy," Mitch said with satisfaction. "What do you know about him?"

"Lives over in Parkwood, which is my patrol area," Rudolph said. "A couple of

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years ago he showed up here and married Frank Sidell's widow. Frank wasn't a bad guy, even if he did marry her for her money. Because nobody would ever marry Janice for any other reason."

"Wait a minute," Mitch said. "Who married her for her money? This guy Frank or Gordon Phillips?"

"The both of them, I reckon. Both Phillip Gordon and Frank Sidell. Janice Harding, she was the daughter of old man Harding that owned the bank and half the town besides, and Janice fell into a lot of money when he died. She"—and Rudolph lowered his voice like he was selling pornography and didn't want to be overheard—"she's Women's Lib."

Mitch didn't want to get involved in that. "About Phillip Gordon," he said. "You say he married her a couple of years ago. What does he do?"

"Got me," Rudolph said. "Not that he has to do anything, when his wife has all that dough. But he's here half the month and then he goes off someplace. Maybe you can tell me where."

"Maybe I can," Mitch said, thinking that Gordon Phillips, or Phillip Gordon, must be having quite a time. Bigamy. Half the month with Janice, the other half with Twinky. And how long could a guy keep that up?

"Let's go talk to this Mrs. Gordon," Mitch said.

The Gordon place wasn't particularly big, but it was expensive in a kind of wedding-cake way. The grass on the lawn was shaved down to about a half inch and the hedge was carved into fancy shapes, and the flowerbeds could have been a florist display at the annual show. The driveway was brand-new blacktop with white edges to set it off, and the house looked like it had been washed and scrubbed and then shined up with a shoe cloth.

"She's garden club," Rudolph said in a low voice. He got out of the car and, with Mitch right behind him, went up the front steps. When he rang the bell and then tried the knob, nothing happened.

"Gordon went to the city a couple days ago," Mitch remarked. "Maybe she went somewheres, too."

"Let's go round the back," Rudolph said, and the two of them circled round, and that was a *different story*. Because there, out of sight from the front, they found a busted window, and through it you could see a desk with the drawers yanked open and their contents dumped all over the floor.

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Rudolph tried the rear door, which was locked, so he came back to the busted window where the burglar must have gone through. Except you couldn't climb in without slashing yourself on hunks of broken glass. So Rudolph took out his gun and slapped down at the jagged pieces with the butt until he had the space big enough and clear enough to slide through. But being a cautious guy he went back to the car and got a cloth to stick on the sill and protect himself from glass splinters. Then he eased himself through, walked around to the front, and let Mitch in.

From the first look it was pretty clear what had happened. Somebody had broken in and gone through the joint, looking for whatever he could get hold of. Still, for some reason or other he hadn't bothered with the big color-TV set or with the small portable upstairs; but the drawer of the sideboard in the dining room was lying on the floor and it was empty, which meant the silverware had probably been taken. And a jewelry box in the master bedroom was open and empty, too, so it was a pretty good guess that whoever had done this job was just after small-sized stuff.

"I'll check with the neighbors," Rudolph said, "and find out if she went away, and where. There's usually somebody next door who was told to keep an eye on the house."

"I wouldn't bother, not yet," Mitch said. "I got a feeling she's right here."

"Huh?"

"Let's look around," Mitch said.

He started with a couple of small rooms and then the closets, and when he got to the big stand-up freezer he kind of stiffened up against what he was pretty sure he'd find inside. But all he saw was what would stock up a small grocery store in the line of frozen foods.

About the only place left was the cellar, and she was down there all right, at the foot of the stairs. Her head had been bashed in and she was lying face down, with her legs sort of folded up. Mitch was glad he could skip a close-up view, what with the case being out of his jurisdiction. But Rudolph examined her, and when he came upstairs his face was sort of white, with maybe a little green mixed in.

"I better report in," he said, kind of shaky. "Sheila—she's the one at the desk—she'll notify everybody. The Chief and a couple more of us will come, but the state boys are the experts, they'll take charge."

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Mitch sat himself down in a comfortable chair and watched Rudolph pick up the phone and talk to Sheila. When he turned around, Mitch spoke to him.

"I guess you handle mostly small stuff around here," he said. "A neighbor complains somebody's making too much noise, or they lost a dog, or maybe there's been an accident. Don't have many homicides, do you?"

"There was a shooting over at Clemson Alley last year," Rudolph said, "but when we got there old man Willy was just waiting to give himself up. But this kind of homicide—no."

"You figure this was a burglary job?" Mitch said.

"Looks like it. And then she surprised him and he killed her."

"I wouldn't be too sure. Because this Phillips or Gordon or whatever you want to call him, he was skating on pretty thin ice. He was running two households, Janice up here, and another wife down in the city. He called her Twinky and she was catching on there was something wrong. She didn't know what, but she was maybe asking a lot of questions about those two weeks he was away, regular every month."

"You think he killed Janice and tried to make it look like a burglary?" Rudolph said. "Is that what you're driving at?"

"He had plenty of reasons for it. He could come back in a couple of weeks and by then nobody could tell exactly when his wife had been killed, and why would anybody suspect him? All he had to do was sit tight and inherit."

"Makes sense, but how do you prove it?"

"Nothing big was taken, on account he was going down on the train that night. Same train I took. I saw him and all he had with him was one bag. He wouldn't want the jewelry and silverware with him anyhow, not with Twinky around to maybe find it. And besides all that, if you couldn't crawl through that window, how could he?"

Rudolph looked impressed. "I never thought of that. Still, couldn't he bust the window, then reach through and open it so he could climb through the open space?"

"There was glass all over the sill," Mitch said. "He'd have pushed it out of the way before going in. So I figure he killed her, faked a robbery, then went outside and busted that window. So what you and me have to do is find the stuff." And Mitch leaned back, thinking here he was the mastermind, kind of like Sherlock Holmes sitting in an armchair and

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doping everything out.

He was pretty sure of himself, too, and later on it was a pleasure to watch the Dumont Chief fall for the robbery picture that had been set up for him. And while he was knocking himself out being smart about how this burglar had operated, Mitch went out to the garage and located the silverware and the jewelry hidden in the yellow Cadillac. And that just about clinched it.

Mitch let Rudolph get most of the credit, and that same night Rudolph went down to the city to bring Phillips back on a murder charge. On account Mitch had jurisdiction there and Rudolph didn't, Mitch made the actual arrest, then turned Phillips over to Rudolph.

But first Mitch told him about the Old Mother Hubbard case. "You got Gordon cold on bigamy and wife killing," Mitch said, "and once a guy like that starts talking he'll tell you everything. So after you get his confession let me know and I'll come up and get his statement on the Hubbard murder."

"Glad to," Rudolph said. "Anything I can do for you, any time—"

"Forget it," Mitch said. "You got your angle, I got mine."

At headquarters next morning Mitch could tell right off that something big had happened. It was Balenky who gave him the lowdown.

"Remember the Hubbard case?" he said. "Cracked it yesterday while you were upstate somewheres. What were you doing there, anyhow?"

Mitch kind of gulped and didn't exactly answer. "I figured the Hubbard case was about ready to break," he said. "What gives?"

"One of those miniatures showed up in a pawnshop, and it was a cinch to trace the thing to a dame named Bess Davis. She worked for some guy in a knot shop, and the boss got a confession from her right off."

"How does she connect up with Hubbard?" Mitch asked.

"Niece. Her name used to be Bess Hubbard, but she got married a few months ago. What she told us was, she'd stolen a couple of Old Mother Hubbard's best miniatures. But the old lady found out, accused Bess, and threatened to prosecute, so Bess strangled her. We didn't catch on that she knew all about knots from this place where she was working, because at the time of the homicide she had quit her job. Then later on she came back to work in the shop again."

"And the nylon pull-cord that was used for the homicide?"

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"She knotted it herself, saying it was a necklace. When the old lady tried it on, Bess made a quick noose and then tightened it up. Like this." And Balenky screwed up his face like he was getting choked.

Around then Lieutenant Decker came out of his office and spotted Mitch. "Oh, Taylor," he said. "Too bad that lead of yours didn't pan out. Still, you can't win 'em all, can you?"

"Yeah," Mitch said. Then he looked at Balenky and Balenky looked at him, and then Mitch turned and walked on into the squad room, where he sat down and thought how he ought to take Joey for a train ride. Before it was too late.

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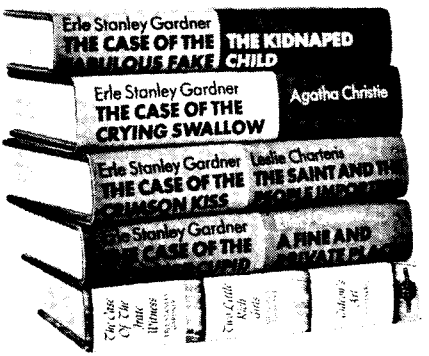

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